‘Seeming Would Be Quite Enough’

Melodrama and Authenticity in *Little Dorrit*

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Constance Collier as the Distracted Adventuress. *The Sins of Society* (1907).

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Sammendrag:

'Seeming Would Be Quite Enough' explores theatrical expressions in *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857) by Charles Dickens. The many borrowings from entertainment culture, ranging from Punch and Judy to circus, add greatly to the impression of a remarkably many-faceted text. Fictive entertainers of four other novels, *Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop, Hard Times* and *Great Expectations* are studied as representatives of various theatre forms of Dickens's time, but they also display the author's complex relationship to entertainers and acting. *Little Dorrit* clearly employs plot-structure similar to that of melodrama and the characteristic hyperbole, the 'mode of excess'. Through the novel's partly idealized and partly contorted depiction of human life there runs a strong yearning for authentic and genuine representation of language and communication. By studying groups of characters I explore how authentic representation feeds on the artificial and makes evident how melodramatic theatricality is an essential part of the text's quest for authentic human expression. The various theatrical loans are studied for what they bring about in constructing representations of genuine human representation. In transferring elements from the playhouse to another medium Dickens depends heavily on what can be visualized. He employs descriptions of body language to indicate inner emotion, making the reader a spectator. On the whole 'feigning' is largely a negative force in this narrative and misrepresentation is central in the portrayal of *Little Dorrit*'s characters. Through surface values such as manner, looks and status these role-players seek to manifest their importance. Juxtaposing the artificial characters with the 'genuine' hero and heroine an impression of authenticity is achieved. As the melodramatic theatricality of the heroes springs from the dynamics between controlled restraint and excessive, justified emotion, and not from the urge to cause a certain effect, they claim a kind of authenticity that Dickens's other characters are not allowed. The overstatement then, performs a different task in different characters of *Little Dorrit.* While the hyperbole may enlarge and stylize feeling above what would be expected in a more realistic narrative it also contributes to the powerful effects of the language of the novel.

I'll follow you: I'll lead you about a round!
Through bog, through bush, through brake, through brier;
Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound,
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire;
And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn,
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn!

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (III, i)

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Introduction

No one seems to dispute that Charles Dickens drew heavily on theatre conventions in the creation of his novels. Scholars do, however, differ on the question of its contribution to the quality of his works.[1] Partly due to the low status of melodrama in the twentieth century, Dickens's novels have been branded as alternately sentimental, superficial and melodramatic, the latter used derogatorily. When his works fell for the scythe of trends in early twentieth-century scholarship, swearing to realism as its *sine qua non*, they were still tremendously popular among his readers worldwide.

Shortly after the publication of an early story, *The Bloomsbury Christening* (1836), Dickens's sturdy characters made their way to the stage in a pirated version.[2] They continued to do so all through his writing career, and much to the novelist's aggravation. Since the first silent film adaptation of *Oliver Twist* in 1909 film versions have run across the screen, and BBC series have provided juicy roles for actors to interpret afresh. Countless repertory theatres throughout Britain have staged *A Christmas Carol* and other dramatizations of the novels, including Christmas Pantomime versions. The cultural phenomenon Dickens's novels have brought about is considerable; the 'Dickens factor' is a substantial part in mediation of British identity throughout the world. His repeated attacks on institutionalized snobbery and materialism seem to have merged silently into the overall spectacle of the Dickens canon, much of which is more than relevant today.

Scholars are unanimous that the novels' remarkable aptness for the stage derives from loans from the diverse theatre forms that flourished in the first part of the nineteenth century. These borrowings, ranging from puppet theatre to circus, resulted in a strikingly spectacular style, difficult sometimes, for more modern readers, to digest. In a time when novelists were beginning to explore new ways of presenting human nature, Dickens seems to have continued to place his confidence in the aptitude of the exterior to present the interior. Dickens 'dramatizes rather than analyses the psyche', showing the physical effects of inner life, and enlarging that evidence, partly through the hyperbole of melodrama.[3]

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[1] Tore Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination,*
(New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2002), 26.
[2] Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens* (Oxford University Press 1999, 2011), 198.
[3] Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2001), 3.

My thesis explores this theatrical influence through a choice of ten characters in *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), by Chesterton referred to as 'so much more subtle and so much more sad.'[4] At first glance the novel may appear to offer less in the way of spectacle and melodrama than do some of his other novels, but at a closer reading I found that this is not so. While retaining the vivacious rendering of theatrical manifestations, Dickens explores 'genuine' representation, of human experience. Through *Little Dorrit'*s partly idealized and partly contorted depiction of human life, there runs a strong yearning for authentic and genuine representation of language and communication. While the hyperbole may enlarge and stylize feeling above what would be expected in a more realistic narrative, it also contributes to the powerful effects of the novel.

By studying groups of characters I want to show how authentic representation feeds on the artificial, and make evident how melodramatic theatricality is an essential part of the text's quest for authentic human expression. My intention is to map and explore the theatrical loans and study what they bring about in constructing representations of more authentic characters and values. Through its range of style and abundant manifestations of melodrama *Little Dorrit* offers rich material for such studies.

Following a presentation of the Victorian theatre and the genre of melodrama, I move on to briefly present Charles Dickens's biography paying particular attention to his theatrical activities. I then turn to the fictive entertainers of four of his other novels, *Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop, Hard Times* and *Great Expectations.* These performers provide valuable evidence of the various theatre forms of Dickens's time, but they also display the author's complex relationship to entertainers and acting. The subsequent three chapters examine a choice of ten characters, loosely grouped within character categories suitable to my studies.

Due to the limited scope of the thesis a number of issues are left out that may be thought of as potentially relevant. I nevertheless believe that my analysis will illumine some aspects relevant to the topic in question.

[4] Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (Thirsk: House of Stratus Ltd, 2001), 100.

The Victorian theatre

Traditionally, the fairs of England had served both as trade centres, religious festivals and theatre venues, with an entertainment culture created 'by the people for the people'.[5] They had provided a show ground for a myriad of itinerant entertainers who made a modest living of their various displays: Theatre booths with strolling players, exhibitions of freaks and monstrosities, marionette shows, wax-works and menageries, circus-type acrobatic gags such as trapeze stunts and mock battles. In addition there were animal shows, such as wise pigs, performing dogs and dancing horses, and all is affectionately rendered in Dickens's novels.[6] Apart from providing a welcome change to hard work the lush and chaotic atmosphere of the fair provided people with a chance to 'thumb their nose at authority'.[7] Fear of revolution kept the London authorities in constant activity to suppress discontent and avoid organized protest. Onwards from the 1820s a growing police force, recruited amongst ill-disciplined working-class men, were engaged in suppressing activities previously legitimate.[8] One measure intended to stifle public unrest was the gradual restriction and eventual closure of the fairs. Popular entertainment found other ways into society, but the closing of the fairs marked a shift away from small-scale participatory expressions of *joie de vivre* into commercial mass-entertainment, such as the circus and the music hall.[9]

The last surviving fair, the Bartholomew, was effectively put down by a civic fiat in 1840, greatly helped by temperance movements and Sabbatarian leaders.[10] The increasingly strong belief in the sanctity of work and moral discipline entertained by the new middle classes made the rowdy forms of entertainment an object of suspiciousness.[11] This regulation, greatly resented by Dickens, is satirized in *Little Dorrit* in the description of the gloomy and joyless London Sundays.[12] Indeed, the rise of respectability, morality and discipline as moral codes helped suppress the old rowdy forms of entertainment.[13]

By 1843 London was heading for two million inhabitants. It held an increasing entertainment-seeking crowd, comprising both the new middle and working classes. Governmental regulations dating back to The Theatrical Act of 1737 had restricted the

[5] Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2012), 17.
[6] Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd 1985,1988), 1-13.
[7] Crone, *Violent Victorians*, 41
[8] Crone, *Violent Victorians*, 26.
[9] Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 238.
[10] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 4.
[11] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 10.
[12] Confer chapter 4, 'Arthur Clennam' and 'Mrs. Clennam'.
[13] Crone, *Violent Victorians*, 31.

performance of spoken, 'regular' drama to the licensed theatres of Drury Lane, Covent Garden and the Haymarket. The act had aimed at organizing and limiting licenses, but the acute reason had been the highly popular theatrical satires on Walpole, First Lord of Treasury, performed in the unlicensed theatres.[14] The measurement forbade regular spoken drama for 'gain, hire or reward' without the theatre censor Lord Chamberlain's license, and it restricted the location of theatres to the City of Westminster. The restrictions, reflecting the potency of the theatre as a political force, were still in place by the turn of the century, but thanks to the Lord Chamberlain, the Earl of Dartmund's liberal interpretation of the law, an ever-increasing number of minor theatres were authorized, starting in1807. By 1843 there were twenty-one theatres in London, compared to six in 1800.[15]

In their efforts to compete and to please audiences of all tastes, the minor theatres offered a variety of acts and after-pieces in one single evening, not rarely amounting to five or six hours' performances. Trying to keep up with the popular minor theatres, and in order to fill their spacious new auditoriums, the patent theatres copied some of their repertoires; the result being that many theatregoers abandoned their usual theatres for the opera. Another result was that the distinction between the regular drama and the minor forms became increasingly blurred, and in 1843 the Theatres Regulation Act finally abolished the privileges of the patent houses.[16]

The restrictions led to the decline of certain types of drama: The ballad opera, characteristically represented by John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera, Polly* (1728) most probably inspired by the French vaudeville and the burlesque, was a satirical play interspersed with short and well-known ballads. Such satirical plays were strongly discouraged by the authorities, and at the turn of the century the comic opera with sentimental plots and original music had taken its place. Sentimental comedy was born in opposition to the cynicism and wit of the Restoration plays. Its heroes grow out of Romantic thought and moral philosophy; they are benevolent of nature, creatures of 'natural goodness' rescued by Providence from misfortune rather than punished for their mistakes.[17] The genre, epitomized by Jonathan Steele's *The Conscious Lovers,* though commonly called comedy, was more likely to produce tears than laughter. The 'laughing' comedies of Goldsmith and Sheridan were still flourishing

[14] Oscar Brockett, *History of the Theatre* (Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon 1968, 1995), 243.
[15] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 352.
[16] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 353-554.
[17]Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 244-245.

in Dickens's day, in spite of its generic label offered plots of sentiment and 'a morally wholesome tone'.[18]

However, the regulations had also initiated new forms, the two most noteworthy being the burletta and the melodrama. The burletta had come to England in the late 18th century, originally as a parody of opera. In attempts to avoid the opera monopoly of the patent houses the term came to be used of opera ballad or comic opera. Usually it consisted of three acts and its definition was so loose that any drama consisting of no more than three acts and at least five songs would pass as burletta. Similarly, melodrama would pass the lord Chamberlain's scrutiny as long as the three-act play was accompanied by music, making even Shakespeare's *Othello*, accompanied by piano chords every five minutes, pass as melodrama.[19]

The harlequinade, originating in the Italian *commedia dell arte* with fixed types and largely improvisatory, was a forerunner to the immensely popular pantomime. The 17th-century harlequinade saw the rise of a new and more sentimental clown and the decreasing popularity of the mischievous Harlequin. Being mainly mute in its form, and only a tag on a more serious part of a performance, the pantomime was hardly affected by the Licensing Act. It remained the most popular form of drama throughout the 18th century and well into the 19th.[20] In the form of the popular Christmas pantomimes it remains an important part of English entertainment culture to this day.

During the 1820's and 30's the Music Hall emerged from the musical entertainment in the 'song and supper' saloons of the Public Houses. Music Hall offered a variety of musical entertainment that grew immensely popular during the nineteenth century and large halls were erected to house them; the form survived well into the twentieth century. The songs were folk songs, ballads or songs taken from popular drama.[21]

The remarkable productivity of the era was equally seen in the steadily growing spectacle of the theatre houses. Technical innovations found their way to the stage, enabling directors to present new spectacle: Thunderstorms, misty clouds, forests and deserts unfolded before the baffled theatregoers' eyes. Fairies flew through the air, goblins hopped and horses galloped across the stage. Even for a train crash the stage mechanics were not at a loss, and at the end of the show the engineer would come and take his bow. All the marvels were accompanied by music, composed to add the maximum effect to the experience.[22]

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[18] Paul Schlicke ed, 523.
[19] Confer pages 7-10.
[20] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 244.
[21] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 245.
[22] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 356- 359.

At the other end of spectacle stagecraft moved steadily towards the most meticulous rendering of the real, and by the 1880s the box set with a fully furnished and equipped middle-class home had moved into the theatres. The tendencies may seem contrary, but theatregoers wanted to encompass 'the world' the 'god-made' and the man-made.[23]

The theatre Dickens knew, Paul Schlicke states, was not representational in the sense of creating an illusion of reality. 'Rather, theatre was performance, pushing against the boundaries of known reality, revealing undreamt-of possibilities, shedding new light on ordinary existence'.[24] The same may well be said of Dickens's work. The many-facetted nature of the theatre rubs off, so to speak, on his works and brings about the distinct quality we like to call 'theatrical'. Yet, the one theatre form, which seems to have affected his style most, is the Victorian melodrama.

Melodrama

The roots of melodrama are to some degree obscure, and yet the genre bears obvious resemblances to many theatre forms that flourished in the 17th and 18th century: The hybrid forms of tragi-comedy, burletta, harlequinade and ballad-opera are all forerunners to melodrama. Gothic fiction, with its reliance on the supernatural and dramatic spectacle, also greatly shaped the genre.[25] But the ancestry of melodrama, with its dramatic presentation of good fighting evil, can be located with the medieval moralities and biblical representations with Herod as its villain.[26] For want of being 'pure' in its manifestation the theatre form has found it difficult to obtain serious literary criticism: Melodrama is neither comedy nor tragedy.[27] The term *melodrame,* drama with musical accompaniment, appeared in France at the end of the 18th century, partly in creative response to the strict laws regulating spoken drama.[28] Michael Booth goes so far as to say that 'melodrama was created by the law'.[29] In England the plays appeared as rough translations from French, mainly Pixérécourt, but soon the form found its English versions. The first was an adaptation from *Coelina, ou, l'enfant de*

[23] Russell Jackson, 'Victorian and Edwardian stagecraft: techniques and issues', *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*,.p.52-56
[24] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens,* 574.
[25] Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd 1965), 40.
[26] Booth, *Hiss the Villain*,14.
[27] David Mayer, 'Encountering Melodrama' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 145.
[28] Booth, *English Melodrama*, 52-53.
[29] Booth, *English Melodrama*, 53.

mystère, Thomas Holcroft's *Tale of Mystery* in 1802.[30] Because of its responsiveness to a changing audience and the prevailing social circumstances it has been subject to constant change and is therefore difficult to define as a genre.[31]

Scholars differ on the question of the social function of melodrama; whether it ventures to confront and critique social systems, or uphold and support them. Michael Booth's major study *English Melodrama* presents melodrama as a dream world, an idealization and simplification of the world of reality, whereby the audience could endure the hardships of the age.[32] In his article 'Encountering Melodrama' David Mayer states that melodrama offered a 'brief, palatable, non-threatening metaphor' to issues that were otherwise difficult to approach in a world of rapid and frightening change. It provided an emotional response to an incomprehensible and chaotic world-order where authorities failed to give satisfactory answers and necessary aid to a struggling people.[33]

Surviving melodramas from the first two decades of the nineteenth century are mostly oriental spectacles or history plays featuring English heroes combating French villains. A change occurs around 1825 when proletarians become protagonists, as in *Luke the Labourer* (1800) by John Baldwin Buckstone, where both villain and the oppressed are rural working class characters. The hero of melodrama is often subject to contemporary social trauma, such as poverty caused by callous capitalists, harsh government regulations or Civil Service hardship, but essential to the plot of melodrama is villainy: The wickedness of the villain is the main driving force as it destabilizes the hero, and provides excitement until he is restored to his former state. In leaving its heroes physically and mentally undamaged, melodrama differs radically from tragedy, which usually renders its hero lifeless.[34] The hero being incorruptible, the heroine virtuous and the villain villainous the audience was never at a loss as to how to separate good from evil.

As the popularity of melodrama grew, an effort was made to make the plays sufficiently respectable for the audiences from the middle classes, who at an ever-increasing rate devoured the plays, and 'period' melodramas were written and produced by the dozen. Amongst the diverse types of melodrama Dion Boucicault's 'sensation' melodramas of the 1840's and 50's became immensely popular. His plays offered large-scale spectacle and made

[30] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1967, 1995), xvii.
[31] Mayer, 'Encountering Melodrama', 155.
[32] Booth, *English Melodrama* , 13-15.
[33] Mayer, 'Encountering Melodrama', 146-8.
[34] Mayer, 'Encountering Melodrama', 149.

excessive use of stage-machinery innovations such as rescuing a heroine out from underneath a crashed train carriage, an Oxford rowing-regatta and equestrian dramas.[35]

The interplay between players and audience was vital to melodrama. The 'stock' character types and their characteristic movement, colour of dress and musical 'leitmotifs' let the audience know exactly what to expect from the action. The well known scenarios gave the spectators a sense of being ahead of the role-figures, and afforded them an exquisite sensation of participating in the theatre 'game' by hissing, booing and applauding. Asides and soliloquies addressed directly at the audience added to the experience.[36] Music continued its tight partnership with melodrama even when dialogue entered the scene, as the emotional drama needs the easily accessible language of music to call upon 'the ineffable'.[37] The accompanying music influenced the acting style greatly: speaking on top of music greatly affects the speech pattern of an actor; if only in the simple fact that it requires an increased focus on diction and clarity.

In *Players and Performers in the Victorian Theatre* George Taylor refers to the highly formalized acting style of melodrama as 'the mastery of semiotics of gesture and attitude' and claims that the language of 'points' and 'transitions' were common for all theatre genres of the early Victorian theatre. A 'point' was a particularly moving or intense passage, and the players expected to receive applause for such an artistic climax. An actress would know exactly what 'an attitude of terror' or 'an attitude of horror' implied.[38] At the beginning of the 19th century training programmes for actors were sporadic and the actors mostly learned by doing and picked up what they could from the more experienced actors and leading stars, such as Sarah Siddons and Edmund Kean.[39] They usually played en face, never turned their back on the audience, and followed rules for how far apart they could stand, how they would cross the stage and gesture.[40] Oscar Brockett compares the acting style of the 18th century to that of conventional opera, and says that it continued to be so well into the 19th century.[41] Being pantomimic in its initial form, the entertainment required stylized gesture and instantly identifiable and morally classified characters. The pictures rendering 19th century melodrama may, however, be misleading as to the idea that it was overblown and exaggerated in style.[42]

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[35] Mayer, 'Encountering Melodrama', 158.
[36] George Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester University Press 1989), 119-21.
[37] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 14.
[38] Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre,* 2.
[39] Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre*, 20-30.
[40] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 256-59.
[41] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 259.
[42] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens,* 381.

The reputation of melodrama as genre was doomed when naturalism and psychological depth of presentation became the norm of 'good' stagecraft. Advocates for the avant-garde judged melodrama as 'excessive, inferior and obsolete', and by the 1880's the term melodrama was being used derogatory.[43] Peter Brooks' study of melodramatic representation (1976) was one significant landmark towards giving melodrama a renewed status in literature studies. In *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* Brooks sees in its nature a crucial mode of expression, 'the mode of excess', vital to the modern European imagination. He studies the melodramatic mode as he finds it at work in French 19th century novels, and its fundamental desire to 'express all', and to 'utter the unspeakable'.[44] Its driving force, he affirms, is the stark ethical conflict facing the moral consciousness, as the melodramatic mode to a large extent exists to 'locate and to articulate the moral occult'.[45] He affirms that 'melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue'.[46] Brooks sees melodramatic representation as a substitute for religious interpretation of life, a personal 'desacrilization', in a 'post-sacred era', created in the religious vacuum of the French Enlightenment.[47] Melodrama, in its urge to bring the hidden and the occult to the surface, shares many characteristics with the Gothic novel, a genre to which Dickens was equally indebted.

Melodrama is evidently at work also in English 19th century novels, and most notably in Dickens's writing. In *Little Dorrit* its impact on plot and characterization seems considerable. A brief introduction to the novel will schematically present its main themes and a few biographical aspects related to my topic.

Introduction to *Little Dorrit*

On the 30th of November 1855 the first chapter of *Little Dorrit* appeared in the bookstores and within a month 38 000 numbers had been sold. The initial reviews were favourable at large; the *Atheneum* proclaimed that the publication proved 'evidence of an ever-ripening genius and an ever-progressing art'.[48] The book has 'beaten *Bleak House* out of

[43] Mayer, David, 'Encountering Melodrama', The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre. Edited by Kerry Powell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 2005), 155.
[44] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* 16.
[45] Brooks *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 5.
[46] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 20.
[47] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 16.
[48] Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2009), 202.

the field. It is a most tremendous start, and I am overjoyed by it', Dickens rejoiced to Forster.[49] Many critics attacked the novel as the Stiltstalkings, the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office appeared to make a laughing stock out of Establishment representatives, but the public devoured the eighteen monthly instalments with an appetite surpassing that of even *Bleak House*.[50] Dickens's new agreement with the publishers Bradbury & Evans awarded the author three fourths of the sales income and between 30 and 35 thousand copies were sold of each of the eighteen instalments published between December 1855 and June 1857, securing the author an average of 600 pounds a month.[51]

The working title of *Little Dorrit* was *Nobody's Fault*, showing Dickens's interest for the idea of blame and guilt.[52] At the time he was intensely concerned with placing responsibility for grave faults and mismanagement in the British Government. A number of recent events had provoked severe criticism of the government, of which the conduct in the Crimean War (1853-1856) caused regular public furore. The Roebuck Committee's report revealed disastrous defaults in both warfare and the treatment of the wounded, and caused the eventual resignation of the Government. Dickens had long called for political reform, fiercely attacking the system of personal and largely aristocratic patronage in the recruitment of MPs and civil servants resulting in incompetence, stagnation and bureaucratic chaos. During the autumn and winter 1855 he wrote a number of satirical articles in *Household Words* severely criticizing the government. He complained to Macready of 'flunkeyism, toadyism', [53] and September 30 he wrote to Forster, stating that 'representative government is become altogether a failure with us, that the English Gentilities and subserviences render the people unfit for it, and that the whole thing has broken down'.[54] When the Radical MP Henry Layard formed the Administrative Reform Association in May 1855, Dickens joined, the only time of his life to join a political movement, though only temporarily.[55] The following winter Dickens turned down another invitation to stand for Parliament, but fired a sharper shot at his targets

[49] Dickens to Forster, 1 and 2 December 1855 *The Letters of Charles Dickens,* The Pilgrim Edition, gen. editors Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford 1993), Vol. XII, 759. Quoted in part by Paul Schlicke in *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 347.
[50] Schlicke,*The Oxford Companion,* 347.
[51] Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Penguin Group 2011), 274.
[52] Dickens to Lavinia Watson, 16 september 1855. In *The Letters of Charles Dickens,* The Pilgrim Edition, vol. XII, 703.
[53] Dickens to W. C. Macready 4 October 1815. In *The Letters of Charles Dickens,* The Pilgrim Edition, Vol XII, 714.
[54] Dickens to John Forster 30 September 1855 in *The Letters of Charles Dickens,* The Pilgrim Edition, edited by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford 1993), Vol. XII, 641.
[55] Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 390.

through the brilliant fictional creations of the Barnacles and the Stiltstalkings, and the labyrinthine Circumlocution Office.

Being a novel set in three different countries, *Little Dorrit* also poses the problem of the dubious blessings of cosmopolitanism. The rootedness and harmony of Amy forms a thematic counterpart to the alienated and homeless Arthur Clennam, 'a waif and a stray everywhere' (16).[56] His and Britain's heritage from irresponsible forefathers is a world of vast economic injustice and global capitalism, represented by an obscurely built family fortune in the Far East. The deathbed utterance of Arthur's father is the only legacy that has any meaning to him, however convoluted (8). Arthur's sense of dislocation and alienation also serves to view the self-contentedness and snugness of Mr. Meagles with critical eyes, whose sole object of travelling is to confirm his idea of English superiority on all levels. *Little Dorrit* equally satirizes the ennobling effects of the 19th century grand tour, particularly through the status-obsessed Mrs General. But also the relatively small character of the gentleman-villain Rigaud is crucial to the themes of detachment with his postulation 'I am a citizen of the world.'[57] In his case, lack of belonging and rootedness leads to murder and cynical exploit.

Biographers confirm that the spring of 1855 in which Charles Dickens planned and began writing *Little Dorrit* he had been subject to a restlessness surpassing that of any earlier time.[58] Yearning for an outlet, Wilkie Collins came to his rescue with a new play, *The Lighthouse*. Finding it 'a regular old-style Melo Drama' with a juicy hero for himself, Dickens was thrilled and immediately started making vigorous preparations for a largely family-cast production at Tavistock House in mid-summer.[59] Far from being a mere distraction from writing, Dickens found acting a 'continuation of novel-writing by other means' and 'akin to the pleasure of inventing'.[60] In a letter to Whitwell Elwin on June 7, 1855 he professed his affection for role-play, 'feigning to be somebody else which is akin to the pleasure of inventing'.[61] Feigning is precisely what most of the characters in *Little Dorrit* do, but in his eleventh and more pessimistic novel, acting is nevertheless a largely negative force. Being imprisoned or variously enchained, the characters still enjoy the freedom to fabricate fresh narratives about themselves and to take on new roles. The shabby debt-prisoner William

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[56] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit,* 1855-57 (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1978, 2008). References are to this edition and will be given as page numbers only, in parenthesis.
[57] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment,* 66-67.
[58] Slater, *Charles Dickens,* 384, 387.Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, 257.
[59]Dickens to Clarkson Stanfield 20 May 1855. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*. The Pilgrim Edition, edited by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford 1993), Vol. XII, 624-625.
[60] Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 391-95
[61] Dickens to Whitwell Elwin, 7 June in *The Letters of Charles Dickens,* Vol. XII, 641.

Dorrit can play the aristocrat, the French fraud Blandois the gentleman, the ageing Flora Finching the sweet teenager and Mrs. Clennam the pious Christian. The language and manners they adopt to suit the various roles allows Dickens to satirize the shallow mannerisms of 'Society' and the moralistic rhetoric of the religious hypocrite.[62]

In December that same year Dickens was touring extensively with his charity readings of *A Christmas Carol*, perfecting his acts of sensational tit-bits from his writings and paving the way for his later financial success from readings that would secure the purchase of Gad's Place and, later, the keeping of a mistress.[63] These events, always running with full houses, tightened the bonds to his readers and gave him a chance to cultivate his old infatuation for acting. On December 22nd he gave a speech to a cheering crowd after a reading in Sheffield, assuring his audience of the earnestness of his aim to 'do right by my readers' and to leave 'literature more closely associated than I found it at once with the private homes and public rights of the English people'.[64]

At the narrative's centre hovers the Marshalsea Prison, a 14th century London institution with which Dickens was well acquainted from his childhood days, when he, much like the novel's heroine Amy Dorrit, was compelled to support his family with factory work. But all the houses of *Little Dorrit* are places of confinement, claustrophobia and stagnation.[65] Even the playhouse is a claustrophobic and stifling place in this narrative, to which I will return, and where it represented refuge and relief in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Hard Times,* it is now a place of sordidness and degradation. Depressed musicians and weary dancers perform their compulsory acts for idle dandies like Mr. Sparkler, who expects to have his money's value in the extended services of the dancers.

Physical prisons dominate the outer setting, but most of the characters of *Little Dorrit* are in various ways stifled or locked up: They are trapped within an rigid worldview like Mrs General's or in Calvinist straightjacket doctrines like Mrs. Clennam's, or caught in a spider-web of financial mischief like Mr. Merdle's. Other settings resembling prisons are the quarantine in which the Meagles family are stowed together with other travellers and the Swiss Convent. The powerful motif of confinement gives the overriding thematic concern with personal freedom as its creative springboard: Only Amy moves unconstrained between

[62] Sally Ledger, *Dickens and Popular Radical Imagination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 221
[63] Claire Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman. The Story of Charles Dickens and Ellen Ternan*. (London: Penguin 1991)
[64] *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. by K. J. Fielding (1960 London: Oxford University Press 1960), 209.
[65] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, 260.

the prisons. The only bonds she knows are the human bonds that tie her meaningfully to life and work.

With its blatant theatricality, its highly sentimental passages and starkly burlesque characters, *Little Dorrit* has proved greatly adaptable to the stage and the screen, again and again giving the masterpiece renewed life. The novel with its intricate plot certainly feeds on early nineteenth century melodrama: virtuous heroes, wicked villains, hidden wills, sudden reversals of fortune and hard-won love. But the happy ending of the domestic melodrama is overshadowed by the corruption and decadence of the ruling classes of society. The real villain of this drama is not Rigaud, although the melodrama of *Little Dorrit* depends on him for its solution. His death does not signify the restoration of moral order as the villain would in a traditional melodrama. The real villains are not 'slain'; only to some extent exposed, like Mr Casby, who has his benevolent locks cut off, and the bankrupt Mr. Merdle, who commits suicide. But that cannot change the situation for thousands of Plornishes who pay their rent out of a meagre income to greedy landlords like Mr. Casby.[66]

[66] Ledger, *Dickens and Popular Radical Imagination*, 228-232.

1. Dickens, and other showfolk

A brief biography

The biography of Charles Dickens speaks of a man deeply fascinated by the theatre. In all his novels this attraction is a forceful and creative agent; in his writing an audience can always be closely sensed and his characters are strikingly theatrical. The following will give a brief account of his early inspirational encounters with performance and acting, his amateur theatricals and public readings.

Charles Huffham Dickens was born on the 7th of February 1812 to Elisabeth Barrow and John Dickens, both children of domestic servants in the household of the affluent Crewe family. The connection gave John a job as a clerk in the Navy-pay office in Portsmouth where Dickens was born. After a short stay in London the family settled in St. Mary's Place of Chatham when Charles was two years old.

A sickly boy frequently haunted by attacks of spasms in his side, Charles often found himself an onlooker to the other children's play, and he sought relief and joy in books. [67] Soon the reading was translated into entertainment as 'he told a story off-hand so well and sang small comic songs so especially well that he used to be elevated on chairs and tables'.[68] He told Wilkie Collins that he had been a writer when he was 'a mere Baby, and always an actor from the same age'.[69] Together with Fanny they were brought to the local tavern to display their talent, and the biographer Claire Tomalin suggests that his passion for the theatre started here.[70] Dramatic stories about Captain Murderer who cooked and ate his brides in pies, most certainly gave additional nourishment to his sense of dramatic impact. His nurse Mary Weller served the bedtime story of a man killed by a huge rat, sitting on his corpse and laughing.[71] John Forster confirms that Dickens's fondness for the theatre dates back to his early childhood, and his cousin Lambert had 'a turn for private theatricals' where the young boy most certainly took part.[72] The theatre in town was the Rochester Theatre Royal and its

[67] John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, *Volume I: 1812 – 1842* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), 9.
[68] Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens,* 10.
[69] Dickens to Wilkie Collins 6 June 1856, *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Jenny Hartley (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 307-308.
[70] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Penguin Group, 2011), 12.
[71] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of an Artist, 28.*
[72] Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens,* 11.

repertoire was the usual mixture of Shakespeare, pantomime and variety shows[73]. Twice he was taken to London to see the clown Grimaldi, the much-cherished clown of the age. At about eight Dickens wrote his first little dramatic piece, *The Sultan of Misnar*, of which nothing remains.[74]

The summer Dickens was nine his father was called back to Somerset House and the family settled in Camden Town, Bayham Street. The bustle, dirt and poverty that now surrounded him could hardly have formed a more dramatic contrast to the idyllic Chatham he left behind. Due to his taste for extravagance John Dickens steadily ran the family into ruin and his oldest son was left without schooling, wandering the streets of London. When John Dickens was arrested and interned in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison the twelve-year-old Charles was sent to work in a warehouse at Hungerford Stairs between the Strand and the river, gluing labels onto shoe-blacking pots. Dickens later related the secret agony of being 'utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position...'[75]. Wandering the streets of London the occasional puppet-show in a travelling van offered some welcome relief.[76]

As his schooling recommenced after fourteen months he became an ardent initiator of school performances. Not only did he play parts; he also assumed the roles of director and stage manager, demonstrating early his fondness for the multitask nature of the theatre. His companions from school days record a cheerful and mischievous boy, always ready to partake in pranks and playacts, such as imitating the teachers and the child beggars of the street.[77] He had a keen eye for human irregularity and knew how to make the most of its victims. Earning modest wages as a clerk he began spending them on theatre tickets and found his idol in the comedian Charles Mathews whose performances, the 'monopologues', Dickens practiced until he knew them in every little detail and reproduced to the amusement of his friends.[78]

Reporting from Parliament between 1831-33 he was struck by its resemblance to the theatre. Indulging in artificial and melodramatic rhetoric, the MPs appeared like 'a company of actors playing to the gallery' eager to uphold privilege rather than seeking the change that England so badly needed.[79] But members of Parliament were not the only ones playing roles: In a rapidly changing London the possibility to advance in what used to be a rigidly divided

[73] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life, 12.*
[74] Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens,* 460.
[75] John Forster quoting Charles Dickens, *The Life of Charles Dickens, 33.*
[76] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, 26.
[77] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life, 31.*
[78] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life,* 34.
[79] Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist.* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 79.

class-system would impel climbers to 'reinvent themselves', resulting in the role-playing that inspired Dickens in his character portrayals.[80]

His infatuation for acting culminated in a letter to the Covent Garden theatre director George Bartley wherein he insisted on his talent for reproducing other people's oddities and character traits. A date was fixed, he polished his pieces – and took to his bed, sick with multiple flue-symptoms.[81] Whether the sickness was a result of excitement, nerves or an ordinary bug, he never made any renewed attempt at becoming a stage-professional, but he later insisted that he would have done better and been happier on the stage.[82] His acting talent, however, is evident in all his writing. His characters are to a great extent performers, and when they are not they retain the over-stated movement and inflated speech pattern of an actor, especially of a comedy actor.

Amateur theatricals

The theatrical events that Dickens partook in as a boy in Chatham were to be the first in a long row of amateur projects that he undertook with his schoolmates, friends and family throughout his life. In 1833 he cast his family and friends in the operetta *Clari*, or *The Maid of Milan*, in his parents' house in London, undertaking himself the part of the heroine's father and the troupe's director.[83] The same year he wrote and produced the operatic burlesque *O'thello,* with lyrics based on well-known tunes. In 1842 he consented to assist the officers at the Montreal garrison in staging a comedy, *A Roland for an Oliver.* A letter written to Forster dated 26th of May gives a vivid picture of himself as a manager who never settles for anything but the best, a director who demands absolute discipline from his actors, but also from himself. No prop or part of scenery is lightly dealt with; everything must be up to the mark and meticulously arranged. When ordering his costume for the character Bobadil in *Every Man In His Humour* in 1845 the costumiers were warned that he wished 'the top of the boots, the gauntlets, to be very large' and the red of his costume 'to be a very fierce, bright colour'.[84] Dickens enjoyed his part tremendously and even began using the name Bobadil as alias in his letters. The event attracted considerable audience to Miss Kelly's Royalty Theatre in Dean

[80] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist,* 126-127.
[81] Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist,* 79.
[82] Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 12.
[83] Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 12.
[84] Charles Dickens to Mr. Head, 13 August 1845 in *The Letters of Charles Dickens.* The Pilgrim Edition, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford 1993), vol. IV, 341.

Street, and people of notability took part; such as the dramatists Douglas Jerrold and Mark Lemon and the artist John Leech.[85] On the bill was also a farce, which included his legendary double-act with Mark Lemon where the two left the text and improvised madly. Dickens was praised, but also secretly ridiculed by friends, such as Thomas Carlyle who wrote: 'poor little Dickens! All painted in black and red, and affecting the voice of a man of six feet, would have been unrecognisable for the Mother that bore him!'.[86] The mixed critique seems to have had no lasting effect on Dickens; he enjoyed acting and welcomed the warmth from the cheering audience: 'There's nothing in the world equal to seeing the house rise at you, one sea of delightful faces, one hurrah of applause'.[87] Another play, *The Elder Brother* by Fletcher and Massinger, was produced in 1846, and in May 1848 *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was taken on an extensive tour of the country and Scotland. The plays were accompanied by various farces. In 1851 Dickens wrote a comedy to the newly founded Guild of Literature and Art, *Not So Bad As We Seem*, a performance that attracted royal attention, as it was performed for the Queen in May 1851 at Devonshire House and for the Duke of Devonshire eleven days later. On this occasion Dickens treated his audience to as many as six different parts in the farce *Mr Nightingale's Diary* necessitating very quick and breathtaking costume-shifts, amusing the audience immensely.[88]

In periods of intense novel writing there were no performances and no public readings and apart from some children's plays there were no more amateur theatricals before 1854, when Wilkins's melodrama *The Lighthouse* was given as a charity performance at Camden House in Kensington, featuring Dickens as Aaron Gurnock the lighthouse-keeper. Three years later, in 1857, another one of Collins plays, *The Frozen Deep,* was chosen for a new round of amateur revels, except this time three professional actresses were engaged to meet with the voice demands of The Free Trade Hall in Manchester. They were Frances Ternan and her two daughters Maria and Ellen, the latter of whom was to become Dickens' lasting companion and mistress.[89] This was also the last time Dickens appeared on stage in an amateur theatrical with his old fellow thespians. When his marriage broke up, so did much of his social network, many friends finding themselves loyal to his estranged wife Catherine. Simultaneously his engagement in public readings accelerated, bringing both artistic and economic rewards, another likely reason he decided to concentrate his efforts here.

[85] John Leech was Dickens's illustrator for *A Christmas Carol*.
[86] Thomas Carlyle to Jane Wesh Carlyle 23 September 1845, in *The Letters of Thomas Carlyle and Jane Welsh Carlyle* 19,(Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1993), 209.
[87] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 483.
[88] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 14.
[89] Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman,* 291 – 295.

Reading to the public

From the early days of his authorship Dickens took great delight in reading aloud from his books and stories to friends and relatives, whether at home or abroad. His texts, rich in dialogue and juicy characterization provided ample possibilities for dramatic display. These sessions often mounted to something of a spectacle, and later became the source of considerable income and considerable pleasure.[90] He thrived greatly on his readers' affection for him and, as William Axton records in *Circle of Fire*, his readings was a part of Dickens's quest in strengthening the bonds between himself and his audience.[91] Through stirring strong emotion in his audience he obtained a great degree of intimacy, on which he greatly thrived.[92]

His first public readings were in support of an adult-education establishment that took place in Birmingham in late December of 1853 and turned out a financial success. When his marriage failed in 1857 he found himself in acute need of money, as the newly bought Gad's Hill needed refurbishing. Moreover, his newly acquired mistress Ellen Ternan needed keeping, and he made his first paid series of readings in London. He gave almost weekly performances in London venues and all so successful that he expanded his plans and embarked on a tour including Ireland and Scotland in the autumn of 1858. He chose passages with highly dramatic content, mostly from his Christmas books, but later also from other works, such as 'The Trial from Pickwick' and 'The Story of Little Dombey' and 'Mrs. Gamp'. He revised the text as it suited his show and usually knew his pieces by heart. For his touring performances Dickens cleverly devised a transportable stage-rig and technically ingenious lighting equipment. He travelled with his manager, his dresser, a gasman, an odd-job man and his clerks, a highly professional team, meticulously instructed until the very smallest last detail. As he advanced in years his audience advanced in relish of their idol, and often their applause resembled 'passionate outbursts of love for the man'.[93] In a letter to Lavinia Watson dated 23 December 1855 he boasted the 'enormous effect' the reading of *A Christmas Carol* had brought about at Sheffield. They had received his punch line 'with a most prodigious shout and a roll of thunder'.[94] Although he was not 'a barnstorming actor

[90] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 482.
[91] William Axton, Circle of Fire: *Dickens's Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre*, (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1966), 10-15.
[92] William F. Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens's Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre*, 13.
[93] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 483.
[94] Dickens in a letter to Lavinia Watson, *The Letters of Charles Dickens VII*, 771.

tearing every passion to tatters' contemporary audiences praised his skills, and whatever he may have lost in actual technique, he gained in his obvious talent for versatility and natural stage-presence.[95] Being their creator he was not at a loss to play around with the peculiarities of his characters; like a puppeteer he pulled the strings and made them dance to an ever-greedy audience, disclosing nuances they had never known. As much as he took delight in these performances he drew no attention to himself and took no curtain calls. Occasionally his two-hour performances mounted to seven a week, but the touring business was hard on his health, so he eventually reduced the number to four readings. Forster had always objected to Dickens's readings on the grounds that it was a dubious occupation for a gentleman, but more important it stole away his focus from worthier aims; the writing of novels.[96]

In 1869 he added the selection that became his last performing obsession and wearing heavily on his already deteriorating health: 'Nancy and Sikes' from *Oliver Twist*. Against advice from friends and family he embarked on a long and wearisome tour of America from December 1867 to April 1868, earning him 19000 pounds and a drastically reduced health. His doctors allowed him a short farewell-tour of London in 1870, including his final performance on the 15th of March at St James Hall. Crowds were turned away at the hall as two thousand people gathered inside and rose to their feet to cheer him. Forster was in the audience and insisted that Dickens had never read with such 'delicacy and the quiet sadness of farewell'.[97] He made his exit with the words 'From these garnish lights I vanish now for evermore with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, affectionate farewell'.[98] On the ninth of June he died at Gad's Hill and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Entertainers in Dickens's novels

Dickens's novels are crowded with role-playing characters of all kinds, but only a few of them belong on the stage or in the fair. The latter represent a rich variety of 19th century showmen and –women, who tried to make a living in a society moving slowly towards mass-culture and large-scale entertainment. They are hard-working circus-artists, dancers, strollers, waxwork-owners and merry amateurs, but never talented and cheered West End actors of licensed drama. In his study *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* Paul Schlicke stresses the

[95] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 484.
[96] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 482-483.
[97] Tomalin, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens Charles Dicken: A Life* (London: Penguin Group 2011), 387.
[98] Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 483.

importance of Dickens's entertainers as representatives of central aspects of his writing, and asserts that 'entertainment is linked inextricably with the nature of his art'.[99]

Dickens, Schlicke states, never abandoned his aim of providing his readers with amusement, and this intention seems to have been deeply rooted in the experiences of his childhood. The 'innate sense of wonder and curiosity' natural to children in danger of being damaged by 'Gradgrindian' utilitarianism, had to be nourished, and Dickens saw amusement as the vital source to this capacity for wonderment.[100] It is therefore significant that children are among the audience of his entertainers, ready to lay down their wonderment and thrill at the feet of the artist. This natural capacity in the child is closely interwoven with its natural capacity for imagination; a faculty so brutally attacked in the hard- headed universe of *Hard Times*. The entertainer, it seems, resembles a medium in an almost religious communion between the adoring innocence, the (child) audience, and the adored, the entertainer. Between the two grows a bond similar to that of Dickens and his audience.[101]

Vincent Crummles in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839) is a wandering celebration of the Victorian actor-manager.[102] His show ranges from purely spectacular entertainment of the kind the young Mrs Crummles executed standing on her head (*NN* 319) to the melodramatic representations of *Romeo and Juliet* (*NN* 330). Flinging their theatrical selves upon anyone who will do for an audience, they are subject to their creator's mild ridicule and the reader's chuckles. They entertain us mostly because *they* are funny, not because of the nature of their entertainment. Furthermore, they never come off stage: their theatrical and private selves seem to have merged into one. Acting is their language; they know no other set of signs.

In his book '*Players and Performers in the Victorian Theatre'*, George Taylor sets out to 'consider what actors thought they were doing on stage'. He reveals that although the actors believed it was their first duty to entertain, 'many performers brought a seriousness of purpose, a physical and mental discipline, and a depth of emotional commitment to their art'.[103] This attitude is reflected in the attitude of Crummles and his troupe.

Vincent Crummles is the epitome of affectation and self-indulgence, always ready to produce eloquent speech and grand gesture. He is the epitome of a hammy showman, but springing to his defence, Schlicke states that, 'the posturing is not false, only extravagantly

[99] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1988), 4-5.
[100] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment,* 4.
[101] Charles Dickens in preface to *Little Dorrit*, May 1857, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1978, 2008), xxii.
[102] Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (New York, London: Alfred A. Knopf,1993). Referances are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text with the abbreviation *NN*.
[103] George Taylor, *Players and Performers in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), vii.

inflated'.[104] What Nicholas sees as 'stage embraces' (*NN* 296) is the only embrace known to Mr. Crummles, and however grand, it displays unaffected heartiness, not artifice.[105] This largeness, or grandiose quality extends to everything these people do, and for all its heartfelt expression, the grand gesture threatens to tilt their acting into caricature. A less romantic vision of Mr. Crummles detects a self-possessed man who unscrupulously turns his daughter into an alcoholic in order to keep attracting a paying audience to his 'Infant Phenomenon' and draws uncanny parallels to other tyrant fathers and uncles.

Another interesting aspect of Crummles is that he, much the same as his creator, has a sharp eye for spectacle. He displays a never failing confidence in outer appearance as a primary condition for good entertainment. 'There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye and touch-and-go farce in your laugh', he says, examining Nicholas for thespian usefulness. The actor-manager has a keen eye for theatrical effect and a trusty nose for box office income and spots poor Smike's 'capital countenance' that would 'make such an actor for the starved business' (*NN* 281). Having dismissed the idea of Nicholas becoming a sailor on the grounds that he is too old to start the required training, he presents Nicholas with the idea of putting him on stage introducing his new 'splendid scenery - a real pump and two washing tubs' (*NN* 284). Then Mr. Crummles waves his magic wand and turns the two visitors into actors. It is very funny, but also symptomatic for the entertainment-business of the age. Many showmen lived simply by displaying something spectacular, for instance a remarkably tall person, as evinced in *The Old Curiosity Shop.*

It is significant that Nicholas, though praised for his talent, never contemplates becoming an actor, as his social ranking as a gentleman would not allow that. Even a sailor scrubbing decks seems more feasible. This low status of actors is also reflected in the fact that the actors are treated like inanimate toys. They are entertainers, and consequently should be at the disposal of the people who pay to see them perform. In *Nickleby* (*NN* 313) a young gentleman 'who was pinching the phenomenon behind, apparently with a view of ascertaining whether she was real' (*NN* 313). The gentleman falls into line with Sparkler in *Little Dorrit*, who thinks the dancer Fanny is there for the taking because she works in a theatre. The Phenomenon accepts the behaviour as she depends on the ticket-sales for her family's income, but we learn that 'the distracted infant looked helplessly on' (*NN* 313).

The merry troupe's repute is somewhat reduced by the 'literary gentleman' who joins in at the farewell festivity. In him Dickens finds an outlet for his resentment towards the

[104] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment,* 66.
[105] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 66.

'thirsty dramatist' (*NN* 634) who pirates his novels and puts them on stage 'faster than they have come out' (*NN* 632). Nevertheless, the players stage the plays that the parasitical gentleman has produced. The unprompted aggressive outburst from the otherwise so friendly Nicholas puts a damp cloth on the final scene of the once so innocent players, and it leaves them looking less glamorous. Apart from being a convenient way of ending their appearance in the novel, their departure for America adds to the picture of Mr. Crummles as a businessman.[106]

In his book *Caught in the Act* Josef Litvak argues that the provincial theatre company is excluded from the 'society' of the rest of the plot. They are exiled within the play and already set up in 'a sort of internal colony'.[107] Never mounting to anything more, then, they are monkeys on the shoulder of Nicholas, serving as comic relief in an otherwise grave narrative. As they are detached from the real events, the events concerning Nicholas' and Smike's futures, their fate has no consequence for any of the characters, least of all for Nicholas, and their 'narrowness and their literally provincial remoteness of the scope allotted for their performances – guarantees that their subversions will subvert nothing.'[108] When Nicholas inelegantly assumes the role of his inventor and retorts to getting at the 'literary gentleman' for plagiarizing, it taints the last exeunt of the Crummleses further and leaves them 'inappropriately' rejected.[109] The rejection rhymes little with Dickens's outspoken love for the theatre, but may, Nina Auerbach suggests, reflect Dickens's need to satisfy his middle-class audience, for whom playing strollers had low status. In her article 'Dickens's Acting Women', she launches a regular attack on what she criticizes as Dickens's 'theatrical energy' and his tendency towards being 'impeccably family-minded'. 'His infant phenomenon' she says, 'is deformed less by her life as stage child than she is by the theatrical energy of her author, who brooks no rivals.[110] The cruelty with which the infant is described supports Auerbach's argument; there is no doubt that Dickens aims at making us snicker at her, joining the choir of middle-class disdain. She is a victim, then, not only of her father's efforts to dwarf her into infancy, but also to Dickens, who leaves her at the mercy of his audience's ridicule.

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[106] Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, California, 1988), 112.
[107] Litvak, *Caught in the Act,* 113.
[108] Litvak, *Caught in the Act*, 115.
[109] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 85.
[110] Auerbach, 'Dickens's Acting Women' in *Dramatic Dickens,* ed. by Carol Hanbury McKay (London: Macmillan Press 1989), 84.

The entertainers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) are a motley crowd.[111] As in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Hard Times* they certainly offer refuge and relief, but they also represent darker forces in the form of the violent Codlin and Short. The narrative speaks its grim language of some of the realities show-folk were up against, trying to scratch out a meagre living in a society that awarded showmen a status next to beggars. The novel is Dickens's most complete assessment of the condition of England's entertainment and its meaning for his own art.[112] The novelist presents a variety of show-folk who were likely to be seen in the provinces of early nineteenth-century England, from freak-shows with giants and fat ladies to Punch-and-Judy shows and waxworks. As such it is an important contribution also to the social history of England.[113] In the quotation above, Mrs. Jarley's contempt for the Judy and Punch-owners Codlin and Short is evidence for the pecking order amongst entertainers. With several wagons for the transportation of her waxwork, she 'has a legitimate claim to higher status'.[114] In order to flee from the 'filthy Punch', the child heroine Little Nell accepts an invitation from the proud proprietress of 'Jarley's stupendous collection of upwards of one hundred figures' (*OCS* 238). Nell is put to work in the caravan as a guide to visitors; 'to point'em out to company' (*OCS* 200), and earns her living as a professional entertainer. In a modest way Nellie couples Nicholas as a hero with a professional theatrical engagement, however short-lived.

In this fourth novel Dickens chose to kill off his little heroine. Death, with the waxwork as central imagery, figures as one major theme throughout the novel. The contrast can hardly be greater between the lofty and life-affirming representations of Mr. Crummles, and the cold, inanimate wax-corpses of Mrs. Jarley. Yet, they share some vital aspects. The collection of 'divers sprightly effigies of celebrated characters' (*OCS* 208) appear as something like a tableaux from a melodrama; numbering 'an unfortunate maid of honour' with blood trickling from her finger (*OCS* 208), a woman who poisoned fourteen families with pickled walnuts and other 'interesting but misguided individuals' (*OCS* 210). But their death-like quality is stressed, and resembling a vertical lit-de-parade the wax-figures hover over Little Nell and bear tidings of her own sad exit. It is tempting also to see the waxwork as a termination of the lively, but also inanimate Punch and Judy-puppets. In Mrs. Jarley's caravan they have come to rest in the grim realism of death.

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[111] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop,* edited by Peter Preston (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited 1995). References are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text with the abbreviation *OCS*.
[112] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 89.
[113] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 102.
[114] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 115.

Little Nell is useful to 'the lady of the caravan', but it is also Mrs. Jarley's largeness of heart that induces her to invite the girl and her grandfather into the caravan to 'eat and drink as much as you can; and don't spare anything;' (*OCS* 194). This grand gesture is indicative of Mrs. Jarley, and makes her a close relative of Crummleses. She is eccentric, fussy and conceited, and Little Nell's naïve reflections on her various whims mirror Mrs. Jarley's personality beautifully. When Mrs. Jarley complains of sleeplessness (*OCS* 205), Nell innocently wonders how this combines with snoring, revealing her own childish gullibility and Mrs. Jarley's self-conceit. She walks majestically, and though she is definitely not an actress, she has the traits of a performer of melodramatic plays: 'she begged them in a kind of deep despair to drink; then laughed; then cried, then took a little sip herself, then laughed and cried again, and took a little more; and so by degrees the worthy lady went, increasing in smiles and deceasing in tears, …' (*OCS* 205 and 235).

It takes thirteen years before Dickens returns to entertainment as a major focus in his novels. *Hard Times* was composed for serialization in *Household Words* during the years of 1853 and 1854.[115] In Dickens's tenth and shortest novel the entertainers carry a greater significance thematically than in any other novel involving entertainers.[116] Although occupying a relatively small number of pages of the entire novel, the forceful motif of the circus provides an evocative backdrop through to the end of the novel. The narrative opens with Louisa and Tom Gradgrind peeping through a chink in the tent into a forbidden world of fancy, the circus-folk rescue Tom from arrest. The circus-owner Sleary, whose notorious lisp threatens to reduce him to a figure of fun, has the same largeness of heart that we find in Mr. Crummles. In *Nickleby* it is similarly Mr. Crummles who saves Smike and Nicholas from starvation.

Although the horse-rider's daughter Sissy Jupe is no longer a performer, she is included because she so evidently represents the circus in the novel. A circus artist 'by birth' she would have appeared in the circus as a child. It is noteworthy that when Sissy performs her act of rescue she has left the circus and embarked on a more 'respectable' road of study, and has moreover become a servant in the Gradgrind household. Through her ability to handle both worlds she becomes the umbilical chord to the world of fancy. In her veins flows the blood of the circus horse rider; she is endowed with his self-discipline and strength. Sissy carries a strong moral uprightness, and in spite of her relatively limited playground on the

[115] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990, 1966) References are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text with the abbreviation *HT*.
[116] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 143.

novel's pages she carries features of a heroine. She impresses James Harthouse by her 'truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself' (*HT* 171). These obvious marks of authenticity make such an impression on Mr. Harthouse that he submits, although she is '-only a stroller-' (*HT* 174). Her language, contrasting the notorious lisp of Mr. Sleary, has no mark of vulgarity or parody, and comes out as authentic, having a 'child-like ingeniousness', 'modest fearlessness' (*HT* 171). The character features many of the entertainers have in common are traits usually attributed to children. The lisp of Sleary, the enthusiasm of the Crummles, they are not quite mature and reluctant to leave the ways of childhood behind.

In *Great Expectations* the ancient affinity between church and theatre greatly colour the first descriptions of the parish clerk Mr. Wopsle.[117] His thespian inclinations are nourished in the small village church, where his role as minister to the clergyman is to 'punish the Amens tremendously' (*GE* 25). The advancement from church to stage is inevitable to Wopsle, who dreams of a more attentive audience to his 'theatrical declamation' than the somnolent parishioners (*GE* 26). The combination says much about the church as authoritative and theatrical and Mr. Wopsle as being self-obsessed. His background as pompous vicar marks him all through his fictional existence and gains him little sympathy. Pip and his friend overhear him practicing his readings 'in a terrific manner' and when saying grace he sounded 'something like the Ghost in *Hamlet* and *Richard the Third*' (*GE* 26). This rhetoric foreshadows his later mangling of 'the undecided prince' and places him firmly into the line of characters from melodrama. The grandiose formulation 'throwing his blood-stained sword in thunder down' (*GE* 39) demonstrates 'a certain form of melodramatic theatricality, an obsession with expression through physical gestures and elevated language'.[118] His application of brimstone and hellfire pathos to his acting of Hamlet has a fatal result, and leaves the two spectators in giggles. However, Pip is equally abhorred by the grossness of the performance, a grossness that the jocular Crummleses never display. Wopsle is not delightful simply because his pretentiousness is associated with the pompous parish clerk, which destroys the element of the innocence.

Tore Rem observes that 'a particular aspect of the comedy must be stressed in order to see the importance of the theatrical enterprises in which Wopsle is involved, and the hyperbolic acting out of melodramatic conventions will inevitably, in all its gratuity, foster an

[117] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations,* edited by Peter Preston (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999). References are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text with the abbreviation *GE*.
[118] Tore Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination*, 104.

interplay with serious parts of the novel'.[119] Whopsle's expectations are as great as Pip's and as he does not see himself he will never understand why his audience fails him; he will blame it on their lack of taste. In letting Wopsle's dream role centre on Hamlet, Dickens provides a satire on Pip's aspirations to become a gentleman. Moreover, Wopsle equips Pip with an antithetical characterization, and thereby the authenticity he needs for the pursuit of his own role.

One would hardly claim that popular entertainment is a central theme in *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), but role-playing certainly is. Although Fanny Dorrit is a dancer, yet she is also clearly another compulsory actor. She does not like her work because of its low status and regards herself as too good for work, but she likes to make a show of her appearance. Here Dickens stages the contemporary prejudice against the theatre as a place of sordidness and low morals. Fanny Dorrit will be treated in more detail in chapter 2.

Noteworthy is that among all 'the professionals' of Dickens's novels there is not one hard-working, talented tragedian or tragedienne. Apart from Sissy, who has left the circus for good, there is not one actor, male or female, who rises to any real respectability as a performing, paid artist. On the contrary, these actors entertain us by their sheer lack of talent, curiously coupled with excessive self-confidence, like Wopsle, or through overt melodramatic representation. The inevitable question, then, is whether Dickens, through the portrayal of his entertainers raises the status of actors. In her article 'Dickens's Acting Women' Nina Auerbach claims that Dickens ridiculed entertainers 'to attract the middle-class family audience, who shunned, in 1838, the disreputable metamorphoses of professional theatre'.[120] That may be so, but Dickens does more than ridicule his entertainers: The spirited portraitures of the Crummles stand to represent Dickens's defence of the revivifying powers of recreation and amusement in a world increasingly dominated by 'Gradgrinders'.

Theatricality in Dickens's novels

'Every good actor plays direct to every good author, and every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage'.[121] This playful postulation by Charles Dickens is frequently referred to as evidence of the novelist's dedication to an overt

[119] Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination*, 105.
[120] Auerbach, 'Dickens's Acting Women', 84
[121] Speech given to The Royal General Theatrical Fund, March 29, 1858 in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens.* Edited by K. J. Fielding. (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 262.

theatrical style. More than often the term 'theatrical' has been used pejoratively, and denigrators have called attention to the stock-type villains and heroines of Victorian melodrama, the burlesque characters and the sentimental passages.[122]

In *Oliver Twist,* Chapter 17, Dickens suggests the rapid alternations of the tragic and comic scenes in 'good, murderous melodrama' (*OT* 103) as a metaphor for human life.[123]

> The hero sinks upon his straw-bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; and, in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. We behold, with throbbing bosoms, the heroine in the grasp of a proud and ruthless baron: her virtue and her life alike in danger; drawing forth her dagger to preserve the one at the cost of the other; and, just as our expectations are wrought up to the highest pitch, a whistle is heard: and we are straightway transported to the great hall of the castle: where a grey-headed seneschal sings a funny chorus with a funnier body of vassals. (*OT* 106)

This wonderful description of the melodramatic plot serves not only to reveal Dickens's own formal recipe; it also calls attention to the theatrical language of antithesis, used abundantly in his works. In *Little Dorrit* the reader is affronted with the incomprehensible dealings of the Circumlocution Office, but in the next chapter we witness the safe and predictable life of the handicapped Maggie, thriving on the love of 'Little Mother'. The heat of the Marseille summer contrasts with the cold convent of the St. Bernhard Alps. The dusty never-ending road provides a counterpart to the claustrophobia of the prison-motif.

In transferring elements from the playhouse to another medium Dickens depends heavily on what can be visualized. He employs descriptions of body language to indicate inner emotion, making the reader a spectator. The reader is trusted to 'fill in' the character with interiority and psyche. Dickens's fascination for the theatre, Joseph Hillis Miller claims, is a part of his fascination with what he seems to have explored as 'the inalienable secrecy and otherness of every human being'.[124] Through role-play and hidden identity, the opacity of the individual becomes evident, as it plays a kind of theatrical hide-and-seek. By taking on a new 'skin' the secrets of the self appear smaller, because the new construction has no inner life. The characterization of Mrs. General, to mention one, is so broad-stroked that to become a character she depends on an active partaking form the reader.

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[122] See Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination,* 26.
[123] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838), (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 106.
[124] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, (Cambridge, Massachusettes: Harvard University Press 1958), 243.

The highly charged emotional language in Dickens's dialogues demonstrates his fondness for hyperbole, identified by Peter Brooks as the 'mode of excess':

> The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic to the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatized through their heightened words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship.[125]

In Dickens there is ample material for studying the phenomenon. In *Hard Times* we find Louisa Gradgrind, who 'struck herself with both hands upon her bosom' (*HT* 161) and 'she fell upon her knees, and clinging to this stroller's child looked up at her with almost veneration' (*HT* 276). Little Dorrit utters lines like 'Father! Father! Father!' (*LD* 348) and 'O dear, dear father, how can you, can you do it' (*LD* 183). Tore Rem observes that 'an elevated language is necessary to create that sense of the 'more than apparent', the significant moral order of melodrama'.[126] The characters manage to express all, even in situations where they are likely to remain inarticulate. However, eloquent heroes were not a novelty to melodrama. Hamlet and his co-heroes rise to heights of exquisite expressiveness as they jump into graves, kill, or commit suicide. The following passage, flooding with heightened feeling and melodramatic device, employs the apostrophe, repetition, personification, evocation, and even biblical rhetoric.

> O Mrs. General, ask the Marshalsea stones and bars. O Mrs. General, ask the milliner who taught her to work, and the dancing master who taught her sister to dance. Oh, Mrs. General, Mrs. General ask me, her father, what I owe her; and hear my testimony touching the life of this slighted little creature, from her childhood up. *(LD* 394 – 395)

It is peculiar that the narrator should take on the perspective of Little Dorrit's father, and the use of the commanding 'hear my testimony' adds a fearful authority to the passage and heightens the already hyperbolic construction. The divine authority is indeed present here, admonishing the blinded Mrs. General, and more than hints at what Brooks refers to as melodrama's 'spiritual reality':

[125] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 4.
[126] Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination,* 28.

> The narrative voice, with its grandiose questions and hypotheses, leads us in a movement through and beyond the surface of things, to the spiritual reality which is the true scene of the highly colored drama to be played out in the novel'.[127]

The passage, in its doomsday tone, also foreshadows the eventual isolation of Mrs. General and the eventual (melodramatic) redemption of the heroine. The word 'movement' is central here, namely the inner movement of going from one emotion to one of contrasting feeling. The author builds up indignation through many passages of derogatory statements about the heroine; then releases the tension, but through a focused and articulated language, making the pressure the more intense. The moment of justified, morally based wrath gives this sense of divine power.

In *Little Dorrit*, as in all his novels, Dickens is concerned with pretence. Numerous characters figure as parodies of social pretentiousness and blunt self-deceit. A character like William Dorrit builds a world of assumed gentility and creates his own social hierarchy within the walls of the Marshalsea prison. Through his role-playing characters Dickens vigorously and effectively attacks the snugly embedded class-division of British society. Snobs like Mrs. Merdle and Mrs. Gowan of *Little Dorrit* are but two examples of such highly satirical parodic figures. Dickens did, however, yield to parody of lower class characters, as seen in the satirical characterization of John Chivery.

The presence of a keen Victorian audience is evident in Dickens's texts; one may almost sense their attendance. He leads his readers by the hand almost, and demands awareness. He calls attention to his narrative inventions by highlighting and repetition: In a play the villain's cloak is black not only in act one, but in act two and three, a fact Dickens makes sure to rub in. Like a musical composer he returns to his leitmotif, whether they be hooked noses or wax-like faces. He frequently uses the *aside*, whereby the actor, or reader, speaks directly to the audience, often confiding in them. The device was much used in melodrama, but also in the numerous sub-genres of comedy, and is a stock element of English pantomime, devised to provide a link to the audience, but also to create situations of comic irony. Sometimes Dickens's asides grow into more elaborate comments, and we get the indignant narrative remarks, such as we find in *Hard Times* (*HT* 302) and in *Little Dorrit*. Dickens is also the enthusiastic spectator, offering his own observations and reactions. The narrator even enters into dialogue with the audience, using the already mentioned asides. Sometimes the imitations of stage acting become stilted and unnatural: The odd positioning of

[127] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 2.

'come and look here while I read' (*LD* 566) might look good on the stage, but it sounds like a piece of instruction to an actor. The following passage is one further bit of stage instruction:

> Leaning over the sofa, poised on two legs of his chair and his left elbow; that hand often tapping her arm, to beat his words home; his legs crossed; his right hand sometimes arranging his hair, sometimes smoothing his moustache, sometimes striking his nose, always threatening her whatever it did; coarse, insolent, rapacious, cruel, and powerful; he pursued his narrative at his ease'. (644)

This is an odd construction. While meticulously placing Rigaud's limbs, and paying attention to the left and right, there is hardly any physical indication of the long row of adjectives following the arrangement. He is an actor, that is clear, hiding his evil intentions, but somehow his body comes across as a lifeless puppet. The acting style of the age will have affected Dickens's dramatic renderings, and could to some extent account for it. There is limited information, however, on details of movement and gesture, such as speed of arm movement. There was an explicitly recognized code, Schlicke states, according to which emotions were conveyed by externally expressed gestures.[128] There was no education for actors at the time; young actors had to learn the trade from fellow thespians and the reactions of an active, cheering or non-cheering audience. Characteristically, it only takes Nicholas Nickleby a few rehearsals to become a fully-fledged actor.

Dickens's affinity for giving life to inanimate objects is a marked aspect of the performativity of his writing. He draws excessively on the traditions of puppet theatre and plays with the idea of living waxwork. The passage from The *Old Curiosity Shop* is a significant example of his frequent use of animation and personification.

> 'I never saw any waxwork, ma'm. Is it funnier than Punch?'
> 'Funnier?' said Mrs. Jarley in a shrill voice. 'It is not funny at all.'
> 'Oh', said Nell, with all possible humility.
> 'It isn't funny at all. It is calm and classical. No low beatings and knockings about, no jokings and squeakings like your precious Punches, but always the same, with a constantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility; and so like life, that if only waxwork spoke and walked about, you'd hardly know the difference. I won't go as far as to say, as it is, I've seen waxwork quite like life, but I've certainly seen some life that was exactly like waxwork' (*OCS* 198-199).

Of Mrs. Clennam we hear that she lived and died a statue. Reversely, inanimate objects possess an inner, emotional life. A bill notifying someone missing is 'weeping on the wet

[128] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 571.

'wall (*LD* 25), strangers were stared at by 'staring white houses' (*LD* 1). London church bells 'abandoned hope and shook every house in the neighbourhood for three hundred seconds, with one dismal swing per second, as a groan of despair' (*LD* 24). The latter passage corresponds with Clennam's despair and adds to the overall atmosphere of desolation. Similarly, the liveliness of the shadows on the walls outside the Clennam house increases the uncanny atmosphere.

The many borrowings from entertainment culture, as diverse as the Punch and Judy and circus, add to Dickens's novels a remarkably many-faceted art. Dickens regarded love for the theatre as 'an innate human characteristic', and swore to its revivifying and educative powers.[129] To him, the theatre was a lifelong infatuation, inspiring him to produce immortal characters as diverse and theatrical as life itself.

[129] Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens,* 574.

2. Role-play and artifice: Performers in *Little Dorrit.*

The theatricality of *Little Dorrit's* minor characters is nurtured by a number of traditional devices employed in comedy, such as exaggerated movement and language, grotesque appearance and abnormal anatomy. Being parodies of artificiality they come across as formidably theatrical. In Joseph Hillis Miller's words they 'have been able to alienate themselves almost completely to from this kernel of authenticity, and to live as pure self-seeking, illusion, surface, convention, what Dickens calls 'varnish'.[130] The three characters analyzed in this chapter are embodiments of social pretentiousness and materialism. They insist on making meaning of form and manners, while concealing their true identity or their lack of such. Their rigidness and fanaticism stifle their surroundings and seems to kill off natural human spontaneity. Within the fictional structure of the novel they are instrumental in supplying the main characters with authenticity and humanness.

John Carey sees Dickens's characters as 'articles of clothing and pieces of body, loosely assembled, and they strike the observer as a set of barely connected impressions'.[131] His view anticipates Brian Rosenberg's, who, in *Little Dorrit's Shadows,* claims that Dickens is 'writing novels in which complex analysis of a slightly different sort takes place – not of a single, rounded personality, but of personality itself as distributed among a collection of fragmented and fragmentary characters'.[132] He observes that when discussing the representation of human nature in Dickens novels, 'one must always distinguish between the portraits of particular figures and the more extensive picture that merges when those figures are considered as an interconnected group'.[133] Rosenberg furthermore argues that Dickens's characters 'rarely create the (inevitably false) impression of psychological wholeness created by the central figures of the nineteenth-century realists'. He sees 'personality itself as distributed among a collection of fragmented and fragmentary characters.'[134]

It is partly this 'fragmentary' quality that creates the impression of a theatrical performance. Theatre history demonstrates that one vital asset of theatrical representation is exactly its ability to be fragmentary: In the Medieval Morality Plays a vice like *Lust* is enough for the creation of a character, as long as an actor is there to embody it. One might give the

[130] J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (Cambridge, Massachusettes: Harvard University Press 1958), 239.
[131] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited 1973),94
[132] Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 112.
[133] Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows*, 82.
[134] Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows*, 112.

characters treated in this chapter similar allegorical names: *Conceit***,** *Rigidity* and *Superficiality*. However, as Rosenberg observes, the one-sidedness of these characters works only in a setting of many similar and opposite constructions, where each relates to the other, creating meaning by the language they generate through interplay.[135]

Fanny Dorrit

For all Dickens's public praise of popular entertainment, the descriptions in *Little Dorrit* help seal the myth that dancers are a bad lot.[136] In this novel the ludic theatrical enterprise of Vincent Crummles has turned into sordidness and decadence. Starkly contrasting the jolly thespians in *Nicholas Nickleby*, these poor show-folk seem to be born out of utter contempt for the less privileged members of the entertainment business. Being here a wholly negative force the imagery connected to Fanny's theatre speaks of decadence and even death: Like infectious disease degradation generates even from the stage door. The door, twice connected with shame, has 'a shame-faced consciousness of being different from other doors' (198):

> Little Dorrit was almost as ignorant of the ways of theatres as of the ways of gold mines, and when she was directed to a furtive sort of door, with a curious up-all-night-air about it, that appeared to be ashamed of itself and to be hiding in an alley; she hesitated to approach it (196).

Little Dorrit observes that the inhabitants of the theatre 'are looking not unlike Collegians' of the Marshalsea (198). She sees a man 'with blue mould upon him' and a 'tumbled' woman in want of ironing (198). Like all the houses in *Little Dorrit* Fanny's dance theatre is a place of confinement and horror. Amy is led backstage and finds that she sees 'the wrong side of the pattern of the universe' (198). The implication is striking, as it makes the place of illusion, the stage, seem the right side of the pattern. The ladies in the theatre have the attentive energy of actors: 'a curious way of looking everywhere while they chattered' (198), but the less flattering trait of inconstancy is simultaneously implied (197). Fanny Dorrit herself is 'pretty, and conscious, and rather flaunting' and inhabits the all-too-dubious 'worldly experience' (199). Yet, she 'has a consciousness of being superior' to her occupation and regards her

[135] Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows,* 91.
[136] Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, (London: Unwin Hyman Limited 1985, 1988), 86. Dickens held a speech in The General Theatrical Fund, 21 May 1849, where tribute was paid to the 'living representations of actions, passions, joys and sorrows of mankind.' In *The Speeches of Charles Dickens,* edited by K. J. Fielding (London: Oxford University press, 1960), 96.

fellow dancers as 'common' (199). She also initially keeps the admiring Mr. Sparkle at an arm's length.

Uncle Frederick sits in the orchestra pit like a figure, it seems, out of a wax-cabinet. He 'had never been observed to raise his eyes above his music-book' (198). When 'mugged' at by his fellow-musicians he 'showed no trace of consciousness' (198) and they joke that he 'is dead without being aware of it' (198). In private life, 'where there was no part for the 'clarionet', he had no part at all' (198). This establishment, where mostly gentlemen like Sparkler come for arousing amusement, seems more like a brothel. The girls are confined to this playhouse; only to them is this not play, but poorly paid toil. Deborah Vlock confirms this prejudice:

> While huge numbers of people attended the theatres and music halls and purchased the theatrical paraphernalia, hostility towards the theatre was expressed in other segments of the popular culture, particularly n the print industry, which may well have conceived the theatre as unwanted competition.[137]

The showgirls of Fanny's dance theatre certainly do not, like the actors in *Nicholas Nickleby*, 'stand out in a glorious fragment, conceived in love, and portrayed in zestful vitality'.[138] Neither can this dance theatre be seen as a vehicle for human affection. Comparing Fanny Dorrit to Vincent Crummles of *Nicholas Nickleby* we also observe that the 'feigning' in *Little Dorrit* is of quite a different sort from what it is in the earlier novel. This further emphasizes the impression of ambivalence towards the theatre.

However, in *Little Dorrit,* as in the other novels, acting 'is not reserved for the professionals … it is a principal manifestation of character', as Schlicke observes.[139] This naturally 'raises unsettling questions about the morality of acting, by implying that role-playing is not gesture but imposture'.[140] In Fanny Dorrit this tendency is more than evident: She displays such love of affect and effect that we may suspect her of being Dickens's parody of an amateur actor. The 'grandiloquent stage gesture' of Fanny Dorrit is partly born out of the same playfulness as is displayed in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but Fanny uses her gift of feigning to manipulate her surroundings.

Another interesting aspect of Fanny's portraiture is that while openly letting her cynicism shine through, at other times she will have everyone think that she is sensitive, much

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[137] Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 59.
[138] Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment,* 86.
[139] Schlicke *Dickens and Popular Entertainment,* 50.
[140] Schlicke *Dickens and Popular Entertainment,* 45.

like Mrs. Merdle. She is 'playfully affectionate' and only rarely shows a capacity for empathy or reflection (416). Her emotional poverty is summed up in three words in the last paragraph as her offspring is referred to as 'Fanny's neglected children' (688). She is all coquetry and gives 'a toss she gave her new bonnet'. The class distinctions of the contemporary theatre are pinpointed by Mrs. Merdle, who assumes that the girl was a dancer 'at the Opera' (203). Much to her surprise she had rejected her son's advances, and 'brought him to the point' of proposing marriage (204).

However inclined she may be towards acting, Fanny resents her occupation's low status: She accuses Amy of having brought her into the business because her sister arranged for the dancing lessons to take place: 'If you despise me because I am a dancer … why did you put me in the way of being one' (204). She is 'steeped in mean experiences' (195). Whatever experiences are referred to here they are not to Fanny's advantage, and she comes stumblingly near the category of Patricia Ingham's 'fallen women'. [141] Fanny is a born climber who is determined to gain social status. As she has learned to fight the feeling of inferiority by means of aggression, the idea of climbing the social ladder appeals to her, as every new step requires a new set of costumes and a new set of manners. As the Dorrits leave the prison she does not care that Amy has fainted; all she cares about is how it will appear to the 'spectators', and she complains of 'that child Amy disgracing us' (359). Miss Fanny is occupied with façade as always and has quickly gone and bought herself a new dress and impressed 'the Marshall's daughters by the display of inaccessible bonnets' (355).

Fanny's narcissism is clearly demonstrated by the way she keeps looking into mirrors rather than into Amy's eyes. In the mirror Fanny imagines not an alter ego, but an audience. The image of the looking glass is particularly interesting in this character portrayal, as it embodies the image of what Fanny strives to be: mere surface. In Fanny's case there is no one behind the mask. She displays her extreme vanity constantly, 'after passing a great looking glass came to another stop' (496). She is 'protesting to her looking glass' (492), making up a dialogue with herself rather than engaging in a dialogue with her sister. Revealing her marriage plans Fanny is 'always stopping and standing still while she spoke' (495). Presumably Dickens has taken this artificial device from the stilted grandiloquent style of the opera or Music Hall: stopping to deliver singing lines has been a well-conserved part of operatic acting well into our day, but the stylized choreography may well have been employed by the stars of melodrama. The shifts between standing and walking highlight her speech.

[141] Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, Women, and Language*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1992), 39-61.

Even the 'best and dearest little mouse' Amy is pulled into her sister's big theatrical act. Speaking of Mrs. Sparkler to be, 'She took her sister's hands in hers and clapped all four hands above her head as she looked in her sister's face laughing' (496):

> And the dancer, Amy, that she has quite forgotten – the dancer who bore no sort of resemblance to me, and of whom I never remind her, oh dear no! – should dance through her life, and dance in her way, to such a tune as would disturb her insolent placidity a little. Just a little, my dear Amy, just a little!' (496)

The wish to disturb Mrs. Merdle's 'insolent placidity' shows the double-sided character of Fanny. Her wish to rebel against her bourgeois values is evident and yet Fanny wishes to conform to those same ideals. By using the socially inferior role of the dancer she will outshine Mrs. Merdle's beauty and sexual appeal. The repetitions of 'just a little', shows her fondness for excessive expression.

The quickness with which Fanny changes from one mood to another demonstrates the shallowness of her temperament, but is also indicative of the versatility of a well-trained actor: 'You little fool!' she cries, but quickly reverses to: 'Forgive me Amy' (204, 205). Her mercurial personality needs frequent change; travelling suits her with its constant new sights and social encounters. She lacks empathy, but feigns distress to compensate:

> With this tumult in her head … Fanny came home one night in a state of agitation … and, on her sister affectionately trying to soothe her, pushed that sister away from the toilette-table at which she sat angrily trying to cry, and declared with a heaving bosom that she detested everybody, and she wished she was dead (492).

Fanny is incapable of gentle touch even towards the people who are closest to her. Her caresses are evidence of detachment. They are mere taps or, in fact, little blows: 'she dabbed her sister's forehead again, and blew upon it again' (494). 'She furled her fan of black and gold and used it to tap her sister's nose' (417). The fan, belonging to the basics of any Victorian stage property department, gives Fanny definite theatrical airs, if not graces.

Fanny's sense of superiority is demonstrated as Mr. Dorrit drives home the message that 'dependants' to respect them, 'must be - ha - kept at a distance and – hum - kept down. Down' (381). Her answer accurately states her philosophy: 'It's the essence of everything! cried Miss Fanny' (381). In order to remain superior in society someone must be kept down. The proud father gives a precise description of his daughter to Mrs. General: 'Fanny, Mrs. General, has high qualities. Hah. Ambition – hum – purpose, consciousness of – ha – position, determination to support that position – ha hum – grace, beauty, and native nobility' (539). In

other words, she is a spoilt princess. Fanny, naturally, delights in attacking Mrs. General. When the 'varnisher' thanks Mr. Dorrit for the news of Fanny's wedding, she expresses her satisfaction at 'having this confidence imparted to me by himself and Miss Dorrit at this early time' (505). Fanny maliciously retorts:

> To preserve your approbation, Mrs. General,' said Fanny, returning the smile with one in which there was no trace of those ingredients, 'will of course be the highest object of my married life; to lose it would of course be perfect wretchedness' (505).

The way in which Fanny rejoices in firing her lessons in manners back at Mrs. General is, after all, nothing but delightful: The artillery of 'prunes' and 'prisms' hilariously demonstrates that as long as form is kept, anything can be said, anticipating Oscar Wilde's further excesses. Fanny has, of course, learned nothing from Mrs. General, as she has been a slave to form ever since we make her acquaintance.

Fanny does, however, on one occasion show signs of real reflection, no matter how 'suppressed' (499): When she breaks the news of her marriage to someone so modestly equipped as Mr. Sparkler, she reveals that she feels compromised by his ridiculous appearance (492). 'Fanny cried too - a little. It was the last time Fanny ever showed that there was any hidden, suppressed, or conquered feeling in her of that matter' (499). For a brief moment Fanny considers the sad outcome of such a marriage. For the first time she shows a possible 'hidden self', and a genuine person appears behind the mask. However, she prefers the prospect of being able to 'assert' herself 'with greater effect upon that insolent woman' (495), and to get back at her, treating her 'in her own style' (423). 'Whether by disposition, or whether by circumstances,' she contemplates, 'I am better fitted for such a life than almost any other' (496). Outshining Mrs. Merdle will, she concludes, be worth an unhappy marriage to 'the noodle' Mr. Sparkler. Like a theatre director she manipulates and puts dramatic scenes into motion: By marrying Sparkler she stages a series of potential dramas involving jealousy, hatred and passion. She wants to make Mrs. Merdle 'a subject', and make Mr. Sparkler 'fetch and carry' like a dog (417). Edmund may be an imbecile, but Fanny, who only inhabits a capacity for self-adoration, would sniff out the most detestable qualities in any husband, and end up bored and vexed.

In spite of her schemes of revenge, Fanny 'is forced not to attack but to compete with Mrs. Merdle, and thus her happy rebellion against Mrs. General is only superficial', as James

R. Kincaid notes.[142] However much she hates Mrs. Merdle, she is nevertheless modelling herself on the woman, and soon she is 'almost as well composed in the graceful indifference as Mrs. Merdle herself' (415). It is not surprising, therefore, that it is Fanny who hands Merdle his suicide weapon and consequently becomes, like a Judas figure, an agent of his death. Her mercurial character leaves her incapable of deep emotion, and she is utterly blind to the despair of others. According to James R. Kincaid, the penknife is indicative of the weak personality of Mr. Merdle, 'having no kind of potency about him'.[143] It surely also signifies all the written lies this fraud signed his name onto. As he leaves,

> … Fanny passed into the balcony for a breath of air. Waters of vexation filled her eyes; and they had the effect of making the famous Mr. Merdle, in going down the street, appear to leap, and waltz, and gyrate, as if he were possessed by several Devils' (586).

This unexpected and sudden emotion is clearly meant to foreshadow Mr. Merdle's suicide and the 'Devils' that ride him. But the silent, strong melancholy is surprising in Fanny. Suddenly she is someone who sees the tragedy of his, and maybe also of her own life, and another touch of authenticity saves her characterization from mere one-dimensionality. By listening to her inner voice an authentic 'streak' blends in with the artifice and gives her a psyche to go with her role.

Drawing near the end of the narrative we find Fanny in her 'little mansion, quite of the Tite Barnacle class' (578). Fanny is, not surprisingly, bored out of her wits as Mr. Sparkler's married companion (578). Mourning does not become Fanny; neither does pregnancy, as it prevents her from 'shining in society' (581). The laziness implied in the statement that 'Fanny could never prevail upon herself to write a letter' speaks for itself: Although originally a workingwoman, Fanny has quickly reached the decadent state of bourgeois boredom: *ennui*. To ease the pressure the ex-dancer now directs her high kicks at Edmund, who in all available ways tries to comply:

> 'And then what happens? I no sooner recover, in a visiting point of view, the shock of poor dear Papa's death, and my poor uncle's – though I do not disguise from myself that the last was a happy release, for, if you are not presentable, you had much better die –'
> 'You are not referring to me, my love, I hope?' Mr. Sparkler humbly interrupted. (581).

[142] James R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 213.
[143] Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, 213.

Fanny's theatrical energy and malicious wit lifts the narrative considerably. She holds somewhat of a prima ballerina status in *Little Dorrit*, perching as she does 'on the flaming car … on her elevated seat' (421). Her aggressive fighting spirit and passionate outbursts provide a welcome change to Amy's restraint and self-sacrificial ways. She indeed does what Dickens intended his theatre professionals to do: entertain.

Mrs. Merdle

Ridiculing stiff manners and superficial language, the characterization of Mrs. Merdle's is a profound attack on snobbery and materialistic decadence. She figures prominently in the group of characters in *Little Dorrit* where 'the surface either falsifies the real or simply varnishes an emptiness'.[144] Mrs. Merdle, whose name seems to be partially derived from the French *merde*, partially from the English *murder*, is a woman likely to draw an expletive from a reader. Her heavily made up servants escorting Fanny and Amy into the house are simply referred to as 'powder', and anticipate her grand theatrical entrance (199). The sense of performance is further accentuated by the acrobatically inclined parrot, which entertains the guests by 'many strange upside-down postures' (200). A curtain 'shook next moment' and the lady herself makes a strikingly stagey entrance. While rising the curtain with 'a heavily ringed hand', she 'dropped it behind her again as she entered' (200).

> The lady was not young and fresh from the hand of Nature, but was young and fresh from the hand of her maid. She had large unfeeling handsome eyes, and dark unfeeling handsome hair, and a broad unfeeling handsome bosom, and was made the most of in every particular (200).

These blunt give-away characteristics of Mrs. Merdle are followed up by more inventive images of death: Much like a corpse laid out she wears 'a rich white lace tied over her head and under her chin' (200). Her jaw, the 'unfeeling handsome chin', is 'curved up so tight and close by that laced bridle', and has never engaged in 'familiar parlance' (200). The humoristic satire created by the juxtaposition of images of nature and artefact, beauty and death is characteristic of Dickens's style. Her language is strikingly stilted and stiff, and her wording clipped and amputated: 'Has not a professional air. Very pleasant; but not professional' (200). She speaks 'as coldly as a woman of snow;' keeps forgetting the sisters' presence and reviews 'the breadth of her bosom which seemed essential to her having enough room to be unfeeling

[144] James R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, 211.

in' (200, 202). The restricting harness of a horse evokes the recurring images of bondage, and anticipates her own sense of confinement: 'Society suppresses us and dominates us – Bird, be quiet' (200). The allusions to death continue in the repeated images of frost and ice.

> Mrs. Merdle's first husband had been a colonel, under whose auspices the Bosom had entered into competition with the snows of North America, and had come off at a little disadvantage in point of whiteness, and at none in point of coldness (207).

In *The Violent Effigy* John Carey observes that Dickens's fictive breasts are never admired as an aim of male desire.[145] Here, they are turned into the grotesque counterparts of 'ice caps' and we understand that her frozen bosom has never kept Mr. Merdle active at night. Neither would it be able to nurture a baby. Rather, it has become a showground for material wealth, a 'show-window of Mr. Merdle and the London jewellers' (328).

The vulgarity of too much jewellery is strengthened by disturbing images such as 'the rings upon her fingers grated against each other with a hard sound' (201). The sound evokes avariciousness. Her materialism is evident from the way she considers money an appropriate way of dealing with matters of human relations: She tries to bribe Fanny into rejecting Mr. Sparkler by giving her a 'cheap and showy' bracelet (202). To compensate for her obvious lack of empathy she talks about herself as an easily moved person: 'I am very impressionable myself, by nature. The weakest of creatures. My feelings are touched in a moment' (201). Her feelings, however, seem non-existent.

The blatant lies that Fanny and Mrs. Merdle serve each other are indicative of their mutual understanding that communication is based on role-play, and that the 'real thing' is acting. When they meet again on the Continent, 'the Bosom' pretends never to have met Fanny in England, and renounces Fanny's past as a dancer. 'You, Miss Dorrit, I believe, have been abroad an immense number of years' (429). They delight in misrepresentation. John Carey observes that it is 'their superhuman ingenuity in lying that distinguishes Dickens's hypocrites. They lie with heroic energy and masterly imagination.'[146] The masterly imagination, of course, belongs to Dickens, but the superb energy that lies in such persistence greatly induces these waxen machinations with life.

Mrs. Merdle's asymmetrical physiognomy is indicative of her warped interior, as her hands are 'not of a pair, the left being much plumper and much whiter than the other' (200). This proportional perversity and the grotesque images of death oddly contrast with the

[145] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, 168.
[146] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, 63.

'handsome' face and hair. Her movement is also significant, however sparingly developed. The curving of the little finger on her left hand is a typical stage gesture in comedy, meant to convey vanity and affectation (200). Other movement are images of ennui and idleness: She 'composed herself voluptuously, in a nest of crimson and gold cushions (200)'. Her hands are idle, and indicative of her parasitical nature. Like Fanny, Mrs. Merdle employs theatrical props of vanity, such as the looking glass. She looks 'admiringly at Fanny through her eye-glass' (430), and by putting the property between herself and her object she takes on the role of a theatrical spectator.

The image of 'nest' links her to her parrot, which in Mrs. Merdle's custody has lost touch with its natural origin and become a shrieking distortion of nature. She calls herself 'a Child of Nature' and flirts with the notion of 'a more primitive state of Society' (302). But, as Tore Rem notes, the 'natural world of the golden age, which she has placed at such a safe distance, has been restricted to a punningly appropriate 'golden cage', and this taming of nature is clearly not harmonious'.[147] The bird, 'presiding over the conference as if he was a judge (and indeed he looked rather like one) had wound up the exposition with a shriek' (328). The verdict of this odd judge would clearly ring: guilty on all charges. It twists the ribs in the cage and licks them afterwards, just as Mrs. Merdle also 'licks' the bars of her cage, 'Society'. She obviously enjoys her bondage.

Mrs. Merdle's 'great and fortunate' husband's financial undertakings bring in 'such vast sums of money, that they are regarded as – hum – national benefits' (404). According to Mr. Dorrit, Mr. Merdle's physician has diagnosed him with a possible 'deep-seated recondite complaint' and Bar, Magnate from the Court, said that there was 'a certain point of mental strain beyond which no man could go' (212). But there is 'no shadow of Mr. Merdle's complaint on the bosom now displaying precious stones in rivalry with many superb jewel-stands' (212). Mrs. Merdle complains that Mr. Merdle is 'moody and distraught', but he promptly ascribes the reason to his spouse: 'Violent? You are enough to make me desperate' (332). Mrs. Merdle's lack of substance is enough to make a less darkened mind desperate, and Carey sees her shallowness as symptomatic of Dickens's hypocrites:

> It remains true that Dickens's hypocrites, though magnificently solid, in that for all the opulence of voice and gesture and physical deformity with which their exteriors are fabricated, they are not allowed to have serious emotions. Real feeling is the perquisite of the solemn, nebulous characters at the centre of the novels.[148]

[147] Tore Rem, *Dickens Melodrama and the Parodic Imagination*, (New York: AMS Press, Inc. : 2002)160
[148] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, 66.

Mr. Merdle's complaint, then, may lie in his wife's missing emotions and her inability to treasure anything but material riches. William Dorrit, wagging his tail at Mr. Merdle, reports the lady's societal success in the Italian capital:

> 'Mrs. Merdle' Mr. Dorrit insinuatingly pursued, 'I left, as you will be prepared to hear, the - ha - observed of all observers, the - hum- admired of all admirers, the leading fascination and charm of all Society in Rome. She was looking wonderfully well when I quitted it' (515).

Mr. Merdle, whose advanced depression and paranoia prevents him from admiring any living object, retorts: 'Mrs. Merdle … is generally considered a very attractive woman. And she is, no doubt. I am sensible of her being so' (515). When entering the room where his wife is 'reposing easily among her cushions', he delivers the highly sarcastic 'I didn't know there was anybody here but the parrot' (332). This house is yet another of the novel's prisons, harbouring Mr. Merdle who is chained to a loveless marriage with an empty hulk. Mrs. Merdle accuses him of being 'moody and distraught' and tells him to leave work behind when entertaining. Or at least *pretend* to, in a strikingly revealing message: 'Seeming would be quite enough. I ask no more' (333). Mrs. Merdle cares only for surface, and complains that he 'ought not go into Society unless you can accommodate yourself to Society', that is, play-act (332). His answer is simple: 'You supply manner. I supply money' (332). When his money turns out to be as phoney as Mrs. Merdle's feelings, the fall is inevitable, and his wife manipulates 'Society' into believing she has been 'cruelly deceived' by 'a vulgar barbarian' (671).

In *The Dialogic Imagination* Mikhail M. Bakhtin calls attention to the dialogic interplay between the direct authorial voice merging with the common view, and the inserted passages of parody in *Little Dorrit*. He gives the example quoted below and the inserted ironic passage italicized:[149]

> It followed that Mrs. Merdle, as a woman of good fashion and good breeding, *who had been sacrificed to the wiles of a vulgar barbarian*, (for, Mr. Merdle was found out, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, the moment he was found out in his pocket), must be actively championed by her order, for her order's sake. (671).

[149] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Michael Emerson (Austen: The University of Texas Press 1981), 303.

'Thus the speech of another is introduced into the author's discourse (the story) in *concealed form*, that is, without any of the formal markers usually accompanying such speech whether direct of indirect'.[150] Apart from being a vehicle for parody, this continual movement contributes greatly to the theatrical quality of Dickens's style: The shifts turn the authorial voice into a role-player; constantly surprising with 'peek-a-boos' through the narrative curtain.

Mrs. General

Another fragmentary character is Mrs. General. She is so fragmentary she is even stripped of the usual identity mark of a Christian name. It bereaves her not only of gender, but also of the possibility of being addressed personally and intimately, clearly seen in Mr. Dorrit's helpless attempts to propose to her by alluding to her 'merits' (540-541). Mr. Dorrit's motives for wishing to marry the governess are based on the notion that an alliance with her would raise his status further. In her eagerness to liken her ideal she has given up a distinguished identity and embraced anonymity: She has become a person in general rather than specifically.

In *The Dickens Theatre* Robert Garis complains that 'in *Little Dorrit* Dickens's method for rendering character and action is close to seeming as mechanical and automatic as the system he continues to attack'. Furthermore, Garis argues that 'Dickens has not imaginatively grasped his characters as whole persons'.[151] The question, however, is whether Dickens aimed at creating 'whole persons' with psychological depth or, rather, preferred to write out his raving, burlesque inventions. Mrs. General is a caricature, not a character, and it is the wild one-sidedness of her 'nature' that tickles us. In Barbara Hardy's apt words, 'we scarcely know whether to call the fun grisly or the horror the more macabre for the presence of laughter'.[152] We laugh, or at least I do, exactly because the character shows such *little* resemblance to a 'real' person. Still, they show resemblance to life, however overstated. Additionally, Mrs. General's blatant madness and incredible nature adds a good portion of

[150] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 303.
[151] Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels,* (London: Oxford University Press 1965), 165
[152] Barbara Hardy, *Charles Dickens: The Later Novels* (London, Reading: Longman Group LTD, 1968), 27.

credibility to portrayals such as Amy's, who comes across as 'exceedingly normal' and authentic compared to this figure.

A whole chapter is dedicated to conjuring up the 'Ghoule in gloves' (513). The daughter of a 'stiff commissariat,' this 'prodigy of piety, learning, virtue and gentility' had set out to 'eke the manners of some young lady' (375). The exorbitantly high price of her services is not to be discussed with her client, as she renders them with pleasure and 'spontaneously' (376). The very notion of anything spontaneous springing from 'the chalky creation' is absurd, let alone anything pleasant. The harsh rule she imposes on the family, she refers to as 'terms of perfect equality, as a companion, protector, Mentor and friend' (376). Characteristically, 'Mrs. General had no opinions', a further development of her anonymity. 'Accidents, miseries, and offences, were never to be mentioned before her. Passion was to go to sleep in the presence of Mrs. General, and blood was to change to milk and water' (377). This chilling image has clear grotesque resonances as it summons up the image of a walking dead: 'A cool, waxy, blown-out woman who had never lighted well', she belongs in a wax-cabinet and not among the living. This sexless monster stalks the earth without getting in touch with life, clipping and snipping all signs of affection and natural human intercourse. As Mrs. General seeks to erase the affectionate and natural bonds between father and daughter, she ventures to abolish Amy's use of the 'vulgar' term 'father': 'Papa is a preferable mode of address' (397). When Amy states that 'everybody is polite to Mrs. General', Fanny appropriately cuts her off: 'Because she freezes them into it?'(422).

> Even her propriety could not dispute that there was impropriety in the world; but Mrs. General's way of getting rid of it was to put it out of sight, and make believe that there was no such thing. This was another of her ways of forming a mind – to cram all articles of difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence. It was the easiest way, and, beyond all comparison, the properest' (377).

No wonder then, that 'it is scarcely delicate to look at vagrants with the attention which I have seen bestowed upon them, by a very dear young friend of mine. They should not be looked at' (398). Beggars are unpleasant reminders of the existence of less 'proper' spheres of life, and disturb 'the formation of a surface' (198). But towards the end of the narrative Dickens awards her a little glimpse of a possible interior, however suppressed. In the scene where William Dorrit attempts a proposal, she reacts with fear at the prospect of intimacy and finds that 'there are moments when weaknesses I supposed myself to have subdued, return with redoubled power' (540). She has, in other words, successfully willed herself into a certain

shape by the force of her ideals, and turned into form void of content. Her 'weaknesses', however, are not evident from any change in her demeanour, but can characteristically be read from her gloves:

> 'To what, Mr. Dorrit,' returned Mrs. General again, with her gloves somewhat excited, 'can you allude? I am at a loss to – ' 'Do not say that, my dear madam', interrupted Mr. Dorrit. … 'I presume' said Mrs. General, in her former impressive manner, 'of my services alone. For, to what else' said Mrs. General 'with a slightly interrogative action of her gloves, 'could I impute -?' (540).

Apart from stressing the lack of bodily presence, the focus on the glove as costume gives an added theatrical dimension to this description. The idea of gloves being capable of an independent life, although a common enough trait in Dickens, further evokes the notion of a puppet or a wax-figure (540). The subtle hand movement of a puppet or marionette is essential to its expression as it substitutes mimicry. The effect is further strengthened by the knowledge that Mrs. General has no facial expression: 'If her eyes had no expression, it was probably because they had nothing to express' (377).

Mrs. General, who 'mechanically duplicates tour-guide responses', is the prime target of Dickens's attack on the superficiality and snobbery of the Grand Tour.[153] Through her 'varnishing trade', self-cultivation through travel is seen as mere snobbery and the prerogative of the upper classes. The superficial tourist, typified by Mr. Eustace, collects sights and looks away from the human suffering of the 'vagrants', and picks and chooses from the display of national treasures. The traveller thus becomes a theatrical spectator, with the tourist sites as the different 'scenes' of a play. It also makes a role-player of the superficial tourist, seeking status through travelling. Mrs. General's colourlessness is indicative of her total lack of being impressionable. No otherness can put its mark on her, as she has no capacity to wonder. On the contrary, she will venture to put *her* mark on her surroundings.

> Up, then, would come Mrs. General: taking all the colour out of everything, as Nature and Art had taken it out of herself; writing Prunes and Prism, in Mr. Eustace's text, wherever she could lay a hand; looking everywhere for Mr. Eustace, and seeing nothing else; scratching up the driest little bones of antiquity, and bolting them whole without any human visitings – like a Ghoule in gloves' (512-13).

The various tourist sites are to be consumed, not wondered at: 'I have mentioned it to her that it is better not to wonder' (396). This statement echoes the fact-ridden Mr. Bounderby of

[153] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance. Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of* Detachment (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2001), 73

Hard Times who also sees wonderment and 'fancy' as a distraction. As Paul Schlicke pertinently puts it: 'His invention is not fancy, but deceit; not role-playing for the delight of others, but misrepresentation at the expense of everyone around him'.[154] The same might very well be said of Mrs. General.

> Of which remarkable gentlewoman it may be finally observed, that there surely never was a gentlewoman of whose transcendent fitness for any vacant appointment on the face of this earth, so many people were (as the warmth of her testimonials evinced) so perfectly satisfied – or who was so very unfortunate in having a large circle of ardent and distinguished admirers, who never themselves happened to want her, in any capacity (671).

In this last breathtaking sentence Dickens waves her off in what could be summed up in one word: *unwanted*: She is unwanted even among the snobs Dickens sets out to parody through her portraiture. The word 'vacancy' sums her up brilliantly as she displays no capacity to produce thoughts or feelings of her own. In the case of Mrs. General, one can safely speak of mask; there is no detectable life under the 'varnish'.

[154] Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, 574.

3. The melodramatic villain

Michael Booth states that the villain is 'the moving force of the melodrama', the *primum mobile*. 'The villain thinks, chooses, initiates action, alters his plans, makes new ones', and the hero is mostly a passive creature.[155] The genuine specimen is 'heartless, unprincipled, hateful and entirely evil'.[156] His diabolic laughter echoes Satan's of the allegorical plays of the Middle Ages, plays deeply rooted in Christian morality. Villains are villains because 'they threaten the value-system upheld by the parent genre', including the values taught by the church.[157]

In *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* Juliet John notes that the villain of stage melodrama has been subject to very little research. She puts it down to the persistent realist tradition of psychology and the subsequent structuralist deflating of the idea of character. The melodramatic villain, she says, appears to offer little to a literary criticism 'which prioritizes the hidden over the ostensible, the ambiguous over the absolute, the complex over the simple'.[158] The villain is a type, all-too-obvious, rather than a character. Yet, often the villains are the more intelligent characters, threatening melodrama's elevation of emotion over intellect.[159]

John states that 'absolute villainy tends to be passionate or passionless'.[160] This 'passionate/passionless dialectic' is vivid in the villains of *Little Dorrit*, three of which will be my focus in this chapter. The gentleman-villain Rigaud Blandois, called 'a self-reflective Gothic look-alike' by Juliet John, is easily recognizable from domestic melodrama. He is the calculating, cold villain. His antithesis is the exceedingly passionate Mrs. Clennam. Between them looms Jeremiah Flintwinch, a full-scale grotesque Punch.

Rigaud Lagnier Blandois

Albeit a killer, and undeniably in pursuit of money, Blandois never threatens the hero or the

[155] Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins Limited. 1965), 18.
[156] M Booth, *Hiss the Villain*: *Six English and American Melodramas* (London: Eyre and Spottiswode 1964), 10.
[157] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2001),10.
[158] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 48.
[159] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture,* 11.
[160] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 9.

heroine physically. He is entangled in the 'hidden will'-plot, and he shakes Flintwinch about (457), but apart from killing a dog, and possibly sending the twin-brother of Flintwinch 'to the skies' (652), he is never allowed any further acts of villainy before he is crushed in the Clennam house. Paradoxically, he becomes the agent of letting the secret will find its rightful heir, Amy Dorrit. Monsieur Rigaud Blandois fits Booth's description of the genuine melodramatic villain, 'heartless, unprincipled, hateful and entirely evil'.[161] He seems to have features in common with the Gothic 'black villain', who is relatively honest about his diabolic nature and relatively dishonest about everything else. Conscience is not common in villains.[162] He also falls into the category of the aristocratic, 'white' villain of domestic melodrama, the cold and scheming 'gentleman', who is replacing 'heart' with 'art'.[163] Rigaud is a skilled performer 'with polished manners' (641) who delights in and manipulates his surroundings through his artful scheming. Although he seems to be collected when we first meet him, we know that he has beaten his wife and pushed her from a cliff (10). As he says: 'I am a gentleman of the softest and sweetest disposition, but who, if trifled with, becomes enraged' (641).

Monsieur Rigaud has his own *melo*, the characteristic musical accompaniment from Victorian melodrama, employed to underscore action and dialogue. In his article 'Music for the Theatre: Style and Function in Incidental Music' Michael Pisani relates that before an actor delivered his first line, music was played to 'focus the audience's attention on the ensuing scene, engaging the "listening mode" rather than simply the "viewing mode", and then lead directly into the actor's line.'[164] Coming to feed the two 'prison-birds' in the Marseille prison the turnkey sings the 'song of the child's game', which evokes the sinister image of a lone figure on a dark 'road so late' at night (5). The child on his arm contrasts the sordidness of the prisoners, and intensifies the pathos of the scene.[165] The refrain, 'Always gay!' gives an uncanny sense of someone delighting in crime. The two words highlight the implied sadism of Rigaud's excuse that in 'correcting' his wife he would 'slap her face playfully, nothing more' (9). His playfulness is 'expressed by a smile', and we learn that his wife's relatives would have preferred 'his correcting that unfortunate woman seriously' (9). His sadism is further developed in his 'diabolically silent laugh' (301) and his 'ominous and ugly smile' (458). He repeatedly calls upon the devil (104) and even refers to himself as the

[161] Booth, *Hiss the Villain*, 10.
[162] Booth, *English Melodrama*, 22.
[163] John,*The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture,* 11.
[164] Michael Pisani, 'Music for the Theatre: Style and Function in Incidental Music'. *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press 2004), 81.
[165] Michael Booth, *Hiss the Villain: Six Melodramas,* 11.

devil: 'Mr. Rigaud, Mr. Blandois, Mr. Beelzebub' (646). His first line in the novelis 'To the Devil with this Brigand of a Sun that never shines in here!' (2).

He carries the characteristic costume of the melodramatic villain, a 'soft, slouched hat' and a 'great cloak' (11). The cloak is a well-cherished costume for its malleability and resemblance to wings. It gives the impression of resolution and energy as he 'flings the end of his cloak over his shoulder with an oath' (10). True to his type he smokes cigarettes (11): 'Heroes smoke pipes; cigarettes indicate villainess.'[166] He has 'the expression of a wild beast' (3) but 'his surface eyes' (295), 'too close together, were not so nobly set in his head as those of the king of the beats are in his' (3). His stereotype evil appearance is evident, indeed, whether one is 'a good or a bad physiognomist' (109). He snaps his fingers with an increased frequency (621) and makes 'a clucking with his tongue' (645). The snapping and 'clucking' are similar to Fanny's 'dabbing'; they are signs of impatience, scheming and malcontent. He 'threw up his arms, threw back his head, hooked his hands together behind it, and burst into a roar of laughter' (302). Such a construction of character is strikingly theatrical. He furthermore 'drinks large amounts of port' (622), thus showing his lack of self-restraint and greed.

Mr. Rigaud's nose and moustache execute a performance of their own, repeated at crucial moments of recognition of his evil character.

> When Monsieur Rigaud laughed, a change took place in his face, that was more remarkable than prepossessing. His moustache went up under his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache, in a very sinister and cruel manner. (5)

This little ceremony of the facial attributes ads an undeniably pantomimic aspect to this villain, and as Michael Carey aptly states: 'An effigy can be counted upon to repeat its gesture each time it appears…!'. [167] The moustache, according to Booth, is a 'token of his trade'.[168] Only one hand is mentioned, and it is 'soft, smooth, well-shaped', 'unusually small and plump' and even 'such a treacherous hand' (4, 3, 109). Mr. Rigaud's hand, much like Mrs. Merdle's, shows no sign of industry. Indeed, he brags of his passivity and reluctance to work: 'I have lived by my wits' (8). The conception of *idle* as *noble* is under repeated attack in *Little Dorrit*, and one, according to Robert Gilmour, crucial to the traditional concept of the gentleman. The idea of the gentleman as a man who could 'live without manual labour' became increasingly at discord with the dignity of work and which made the new industrial

[166] Michael Booth, *English Melodrama*, 20.
[167] Michael Carey, *The Violent Effigy* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1973), 86.
[168] M. Booth, *English Melodrama*, 20.

society possible.[169] What Gilmour calls the 'uneasy Victorian fascination with the figure of the dandy' is satirised in *Little Dorrit* through the self-love of Rigaud.[170] Mr. Merdle also lives, if not happily, by his wits. The evil of idleness is combined with regular diabolism in Rigaud, 'the fingers lithely twisting about and twining over one another like serpents' (625). Rigaud is an embodiment of pure evil and 'his villainy is clearly written on his body, a traditional melodramatic device in one of the most bodily of aesthetic modes'.[171]

His theatricality is paramount. The dubious talent is emphasized in 'whatever he did, he overdid' (300). This excessive style threatens to render the gentleman totally harmless. John goes as far as to call him 'the grotesque spectre of melodramatic decadence'.[172]

> His theatrical air, as he stood with one arm on his hip, within the folds of his cloak, together with his manner of disregarding his companion and oppressing the opposite wall instead, seemed to intimate that he was rehearsing for the President, whose examination he was shortly to undergo, rather than troubling himself merely to enlighten so small a person as John Baptiste Cavalletto (8).

He is a poser and a dandy, 'putting his arms a-kimbo, and striding his legs wide apart' (302). The assumed names of Rigaud, Lagnier and Blandois are evidence of a chameleonic character, but not of a split one. His different names are merely disguises, and 'suggest no split in his character', as Brian Rosenberg states.[173] 'He remains always in control of his various identities and is aware of their essential singularity, referring to himself openly, in the end, as Rigaud Lagnier Blandois' (656). This peculiar control contributes to his double nature as artificial and yet authentic. As an *actor* he is authentic because he plays his part in full. As he says, 'I have a partiality for everything that is genuine. Such as I am, I am genuine myself' (298). When another natural actor, the Italian Cavaletto, describes him to Arthur, he does a little impersonation and enhances its stereotypical theatrical language:

> With his rapid, native action his hands made the outline of a high hook nose, pushed his eyes near together, dishevelled his hair, puffed out his upper lip to represent the moustache, and threw the heavy end of the ideal cloak over his shoulder … he indicated a very remarkable and sinister smile (565).

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[169] Robert Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Society*, (George and Allen Unwin (Publisher's) Ltd, 1981), 7.
[170] Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Society*, 7.
[171] Sally Ledger, 230.
[172] Juliet John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture,* 113.
[173] Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows*, 90.

Monsieur Rigaud's French origin rhymes with his affected manners and vanity: 'I kiss the hand of Madame F' (625) and 'Politeness and little gallantries are inseparable from my character' (626). He also speaks lovingly of the grotesque Mr. Flintwinch and indulges in lyrical, passionate phrases: 'Ah, but you look young and fresh as the flowers of Spring! Ah, good little boy! Brave child, brave child! (457). His love for his 'Little pig' (457) has the effect of showing his preference in human nature, and it simultaneously reflects his excessive greed and almost cannibalism. Albeit of French citizen, he has no roots and he brags that he is a 'citizen of the world' (8) and 'from half a dozen countries' (297). Having killed his wife and ruined his home, he lacks a sense of belonging. When he states that 'I am of no country' (297), he may imply that he is a theatrical gentleman; he belongs to the world of fancy. This is the actor at work saying 'Frankness is part of my character' (10), and 'it's my character to be impatient' (455). By 'character' he simply means 'role'.

He awards himself the heroic traits of the Romantic melodramatic hero: 'sensitive, ardent, conscientious, and imaginative' (300) and even 'brave' (111). Through his insistence of being a gentleman he links himself firmly to the novel's real hero, and he anticipates the hero by laying claim to *his* assets before we even meet Clennam. 'Haha! You are right! A gentleman I am! And a gentleman I'll live, and a gentleman I'll die. It's my intent to be a gentleman'. Then he goes on to the truth of the matter: 'It's my game. Death of my soul, I play it wherever I go!' (7). Contrary to his insistent claims that he is a gentleman, he behaves like a savage: He 'spat suddenly on the pavement and gurgled in his throat' (4). Dickens wastes no time in revealing the fraud:

> He had a certain air of being a handsome man - which he was not; and a certain air of being a well-bred man – which he was not. It was mere swagger and challenge; but in this particular, as in many others, blustering assertion goes for proof, half over the world' (9).

Such haughtiness is clearly meant to be hissed in Dickens's characters: In case we miss the point, the narrator's aside rubs it in. Like many other 'gentlemen' he play-acts the gentleman but does not possess any of the qualities that Dickens seems to have associated with a 'true gentleman'. After Merdle has committed suicide, the chief butler says: 'Sir, Mr. Merdle never was the gentleman, and no ungentlemanly act on Mr. Merdle's would surprise me' (592). Rigaud makes other people subservient to him and claims that 'a gentleman must be waited on' (622). The very concept of master and servant, indeed, is based on role-playing, something Rigaud exploits to the full: 'I can't submit; I must govern' (9).

Yet, as the narrator informs us, the world will be deceived, and 'blustering assertion goes for proof, half over the world' (9). Thus, acting makes the (gentle) man, and the theatrical artist has created himself through sheer 'modelling'. When Amy Dorrit enters Henry Gowan's studio she recoils at the sight of Blandois, whereupon Gowan reassures her: 'Don't be alarmed … it's only Blandois. He is doing duty as a model to-day. I am making a study of him' (410). This is in line with his own profession: 'I love and study the picturesque, in all its varieties. I have even been called picturesque myself' (300). The dandyism implied, Juliet John argues, is the inversion of melodrama, as self-worship challenges the ideas of community and social responsibility.[174] Selfless love and earnestness is a barometer for authentic behaviour and acting is to manipulate one's surroundings. However, this gentleman-villain does possess heroic qualities: He makes things happen, which Clennam (initially) does not. His popularity amongst the readers would probably equal that of the hero's, the spectacle considered. Ironically, he calls Clennam 'fellow jail-bird' (620) and 'brother-bird'. While Blandois, typically showing no sign of regret for his crime, and has no regrets, Arthur must suffer for the crimes of his parents.

Mr. Rigaud's glance has hypnotic power, and Amy, once 'attracted by his peculiar eyes she could not remove her own' (413). Both Affery (297) and Amy are drawn into his vicious magnetism, and Gowan wonders what 'devil' Blandois has 'conjured into the dog?' (413). That he later poisons the dog and threatens to poison Arthur (458) clearly makes him into a coward, irrevocably: Poison is not the weapon of a hero. Scholars have suggested Dickens's likely source of inspiration in drawing the characters of Rigaud from the French assassin and poisoner Lacenaire (1818-1836), who performed his crime with unusual cold-bloodedness. He was unusually obsessed with the theatre, and regarded his appearance in court at his trial as a performance.[175]

With his 'hooked nose' and evil laughter, Rigaud Lagnier Blandois is indeed 'doing duty as model' of Victorian (domestic) melodrama. From the landlady of the Break of Day we learn this remarkable lesson:

> And I tell you this, my friend, that there are people (men and women both, unfortunately) who have no good in them – none. That there are people whom it is necessary to detest without compromise. That there are people who must be dealt with as enemies of the human race. That there are people who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage beast and cleared out of the way (107).

[174] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture,* 143.
[175] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture,* 75.

The passage demonstrates the unconditional moral universe of melodrama: Allowing for total condemnation of his villain, Dickens paves the way for his destruction. The character of Rigaud is therefore vital because he provides an image of moral absolutes in a world that renders them increasingly muddied.[176] In the case of a deviant character like Mrs. Wade we learn through the story of her past that she has reasons for her vindictiveness (554-561). Rigaud is offered no mollifying past; he 'must be crushed' (107). One of the guest's feeble attempts of defending the man with a piece of 'philosophical philanthropy' that 'he had, and has, some good in him' is brutally quenched (106). When found in the ruins of the Clennam house, he is brutally referred to as 'the dirty heap of rubbish that had been the foreigner' (662). Mrs. Clennam, on the contrary, is given the contours of a psyche through her traumatic past, and it undeniably softens the reader's judgement of her as she staggers around in her misery (656). When Rigaud, as predicted by the landlady, is finally smashed to death under the house of Clennam, the moral rottenness of its habitants is simultaneously implied. But, earlier stated, the real villains of this narrative are society's evildoers, securely placed in government positions, as Tite Barnacle, or embedded in ill-got capital, as Casby. No melodramatic ending can crush them.

Mrs. Clennam

Mrs. Clennam is *Little Dorrit's* most truly terrifying character. Compared to her, the blackmailer Rigaud comes across as a mere cardboard figure. Resident of a dilapidated house haunted by strange noises, Mrs. Clennam resembles the villain referred to by Juliet John as the Gothic 'castle-dungeon-ghost' melodrama:

> The Gothic villain puts personal feeling before law, family, or community, and thus violates melodrama's communal ethos… Violent feeling is the hallmark of the Gothic villain and the intensity with which his feelings are expressed can create the impression that the villain is not human but super human.[177]

In her hatred Mrs. Clennam has translated the scriptures into a fanatical doctrine, which has frozen her into a grotesque distortion of a human being even more fearful than the other wax-works of *Little Dorrit*. Haunted by sexual jealousy, she has forced herself to live a 'righteously afflicted' (37) reclusive life, wheelchair-bound as punishment for her sins, 'a

[176] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture,* 10.
[177] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 51.

woman of strong head and great talent' (653). John notes that melodramatic villains are 'not infrequently internally focused, guilty of self-violation as well as the violation of the self-hood of others'.[178] The self-violation of Mrs. Clennam is so extreme that she has made herself crippled and almost ruined her own child as she wilfully misinterprets her function as mother and wife. Jealousy has poisoned her ability for 'natural affection and gentle intercourse' (24). Her greeting of her son is a mere 'glassy kiss and four muffled worsted fingers' (27). Contrary to the Gothic stage villains, who do not venture to hide their evil intentions, Mrs. Clennam disguises her vindictiveness in biblical rhetoric: 'Man! I justify myself by the authority of these books, she cried' (154).

However, she has none of the comical features of the other 'waxwork' figures of *Little Dorrit*. Her ghastly appearance and sadomasochistic practices evade laughter, however caricatured. One may snicker at the way she cunningly twists her biblical allusions, but our laughter is mixed with shudders as we read her revengeful perversion of the Pater Noster.

> Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite Thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would do, and Thou shalt have my worship: this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven (38).

Her evening meal has nothing of the homely evening tea. It is reminiscent of the taking of some bitter-tasting remedy prescribed by an evil doctor. Flintwinch and Affery, like two sextons, attend to the spectacle with habitual gloom (29).

> When the invalid had eaten all the rusks and drunk all the mixture, the two trays were removed; and the books and the candle, watch, handkerchief and spectacles were replaced upon the table. She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book - sternly, fiercely, wrathfully – praying that her enemies (she made them by her manner and her tone expressively hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated (29).

Highly dramatic images of damnation and hellfire, this parody on ritual also points to the strong kinship between dramatic art and the practice of religion. These rituals, however, are void of a sincere wish to connect with a perceived spiritual dimension. All that remains is a skeleton of obsessive-compulsory actions, void of meaning. The scene additionally draws attention to the immense power of religious ceremony, here employed by an obsessed woman:

[178] John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 13.

Her victim is compelled to sit through the whole performance, as he did as a child, hypnotized by its ritualistic force. Albeit a spectator, Arthur is drawn into its maelstrom of hateful rhetoric that has paralyzed his will from an early age, 'all the dark horrors of the usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to overshadow him' (29). On a 'black bier-like sofa', this giant black tarantella silently spins her web of quasi-religious commandments. Arthur's inevitable retreat into himself makes him unable to connect with the world in any other way than as onlooker. The Plagues of Egypt decorates her wall, 'glazed and framed', speaking its clear language of her doomsday-conception of the bible. Her language is a parody of Old Testament rhetoric; the 'hollow vanities' echoes the *Book of Ecclesiastes* 1:2: 'Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher … all is vanity'.[179]

The ceremonial of eating the oysters is another obvious play with church rite as performance. The ringing of the bell, the oysters 'circularly set out a white plate on a tray covered with a white napkin' and the 'compact glass of cool wine and water' (44), all evoke images of the Holy Communion, especially of the Roman Catholic Church, and increase the sense of theocracy and compulsion, but also of theatrical representation. But Mrs. Clennam is in no state to receive the Holy Communion; she is stuck in a most unholy pathological communion with her conviction. Towards the end, the narrator surprisingly lets Mr. Flintwinch give her a dose of her true self: 'You call yourself humble and sinful, but you are the most Bumptious of your sex. That's what *you* are (652)'. He goes on:

> Just as you cheat yourself into making out, that you didn't do all this business because you were a rigorous woman, all slight, and spite, and power, and unforgivingness, but because you were a servant and a minister, and were appointed to do it. Who are you, that you should be appointed to do it? (652).

According to Emma Mason, Dickens loathed the punitive and evangelistic side of evangelism, embodied in the character of Mrs. Clennam.[180] Mason shows how Dickens drew from his early experience of dreary religious services. When he was four, his family started attending a Baptist church in Chatham, where he had to endure 'endless sermons' by the preacher, 'horrified by what he understood to be a cruel and judgemental Old Testament Christianity'.[181]

[179] *The Bible. Authorized King James Version.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 751.
[180] Emma Mason, 'Religion' in *Charles Dickens in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 211), 322.
[181] Emma Mason, 'Religion' in *Charles Dickens in Context*, 318-319.

> There was the interminable Sunday of his nonage; when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a bible – bound like her own construction of it in the hardest, barest and straightest boards, with one dinted ornament on the cover, like the drag of a chain, and a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves – as if it, of all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse' (24).

The indignant aside 'of all Books!' is there to remind the reader of the intended message of forgiveness and mercy. Mrs. Clennam's 'construction of the bible' echoes the last will of Dickens, where, speaking of the New Testament, he explicitly warns his children 'to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of it'.[182] Her construal is a strict, Calvinist interpretation, 'a theology that seemed to place more emphasis on law than grace', rooted deeply in the Old Testament.[183] 'Legalistic religion opens the possibility of bargaining with God', Richard Blucher states in his master's thesis, and indeed, Mrs. Clennam is 'always balancing her bargains with the Majesty of Heaven, posting up the entries to her credit, strictly keeping her set-off, and claiming her due' (40).

In the character of Mrs. Clennam a number of the main themes in *Little Dorrit* seem to come together. Through her secretive ways and hidden will she embodies the claustrophobia of the abuse of power in the Circumlocution Office. Arthur is kept in the dark about the creditors of the Dorrits, and his mother bars him from knowing the truth about his own past through the hiding of the will, aptly expressed by Flintwinch 'no one but you knows where it is, and that's power' (653). Her religion is purely mercantile, and has no more spirituality to it than the 'dancing around the Golden Calf', embodied in the idolatry of Mr. Merdle. However crippled, it is her frozenness of mind that is most frightening, and thus Mrs. Clennam is the truest or most efficient carrier of the notion that imprisonment is a state of mind.[184] The terror of such stoniness is seen in her inability to love her son, or anyone else. Like Mr. Merdle, the House of Clennam has been 'grasping at money and driving hard bargains' (39), and is, through their murky business in China, a representative of British colonial exploitation and capitalism. We never hear exactly what the trade of Clennam & Co is, but the office in China may indicate opium.[185] When the House of Clennam literally collapses, we see 'the decay at

[182] Michael Slater, *The Genius of Dickens: The Ideas and Inspiration of Britain's Greatest Novelist,* (London: Dockwork Overlook 1999, 1001), 153.
[183] Richard Blucher, 'Biblical and Religious Matter in Little Dorrit' (Master's Thesis, Authumn Term University of Oslo 1992), 95.
[184] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1958), 241, 235.
[185] Amanda Anderson points to the British aggressive pursuit of opium resulting in Opium Wars of the 1830s-40s. *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment,* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 72.

the heart of Britain's capital city'; also 'symbolizing the rottenness of Britain's commercial culture in general'.[186]

One of the most dramatic moments of *Little Dorrit* comes when the invalid Mrs. Clennam, like a Lazarus of Bethany, rises from her wheelchair.

> She put her two hands to her head again, and uttered a low exclamation, and started to her feet. She staggered for a moment, as if she would have fallen; then stood firm. … It was, to all the three, as if a dead person had risen (654).

Then we witness the 'female Lucifer in appetite for Power' (653) wrapping on 'a hood or shawl' and, as if spreading its evil wings, running 'wildly through the courtyard' (655). Such theatrical spectacle, if performed on a stage, would most likely have drawn an exclamation of wonderment from an audience. Driven out of her role as cripple she tries, in one desperate charge, to save her cruel secret from being revealed. The extreme emotional charge of these passages is drawn from the series of *pictures* taken of the character as it makes physical its desperation. As she approaches the Marshalsea, Dickens calls her 'the figure' and 'it' for two paragraphs (656). Like a director he now builds up a regular crowd-scene: 'the figure attracted all eyes', 'busy people … slackened their heads and turned their heads' and 'companions crossing and standing aside, whispered one another to look at this spectral woman,' (656). The subsequent passage, where Mrs. Clennam talks to Amy, turns her gradually into a human being. She surrenders completely, even kneels down to Amy, and is rescued by Amy's blessing and forgiveness; 'purged' by melodrama. It is the melodramatic villain, Rigaud, who is smashed to pieces when the house collapses, not Mrs. Clennam. Interestingly, her answer to Little Dorrit's offers of congratulations at her recovery is as follows: 'This is not recovery; it is not strength. I don't know what it is' (658). The all-knowing not knowing is something of a surprise, and the breakdown makes her pretence evident. It also foreshadows the spectacular collapse of her house. As she speaks of her childhood to Flintwinch and Rigaud, she breaks into an account of her miserable upbringing. 'Mine was no light youth of gaiety and pleasure. Mine were days of wholesome repression, punishment and fear' (646). Thus the novel endows Mrs. Clennam with a traumatic childhood, and this moment of humanization gives her an unexpected streak of genuineness. But the effort to give her a psyche may be overdue; she is beyond saving, so to speak. Yet,

[186] Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 231.

when Amy, in imitation of Christ, forgives Mrs. Clennam, the reader is at least prepared. We are more likely to buy the possibility of reconciliation after the sad story of her past. The breakdown is subtly foreshadowed by her somewhat softer attitude towards Amy, when the narrator reveals that there are 'degrees of hardness in the hardest metal' (45).

Jeremiah Flintwinch

Mrs. Clennam's business partner Jeremiah Flintwinch is also her partner in the trade of violence. He delights as much in physical abuse as she seems to do in mental violence. In her book *Violent Victorians* Rosalind Crone points out that violence was a central element of Victorian entertainment, its most significant amusement being the blood sports.[187] They included man-to-man combats, such as wrestling, cudgelling and bare-knuckle fighting. Violence, or the threat of violence, greatly shaped the plots of stage melodrama and made its audience gasp in horror and delight. Villains of all evil sorts stole across British stages and shot or strangled or stabbed the heroine; or at least threatened to do so. The notoriously abusive puppet Mr. Punch knocked his wife endlessly about in numerous street-booths and seaside resorts, accompanied by drums and panpipes.[188]

Mr. Punch, Crone says, derives from the Italian commedia dell arte figure Pulcinella, who came to England during the restoration period. Although its name is a derivation of the Italian commedia dell'arte character of Punchinello Punch bears characteristics of several of the Italian types acquired through its wandering through the ages from it appeared in Restoration London. Providing the comic interlude, the puppet became exceedingly popular both in the fairground booths and in the more sophisticated theatres of the West End. By the turn of the nineteenth century however, Mr. Punch, now a glove puppet, became an increasingly popular character in plays of his own. He also became increasingly violent. With his characteristic stick, he would punch anyone who came in his way and provide easily deciphered amusement to bustling crowds of street spectators. A character of mixed appeal, he developed from a cuckolded husband engaged in violent marital quarrels, into a notorious wife-beater. He also lashed out against authorities and societal unities, such as family. The shows, Crone argues, sought to uphold the institution of the patriarchal marriage, and

[187] Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 2012), 42.
[188] Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century,* 48.

acceptance for the male rights to enforce marital expectations.[189] During the first decades of the nineteenth century he emerged as the murderous bully beating his wife, Judy, most often, to death. With his slapstick and knock-about violence Punch provided welcome relief for social tension, and Punch and Judy, as the shows were called, functioned as a mini-revolution in a country where the authorities had succeeded in suppressing revolt.[190] Thus the shows become satire, parodying the violence it sought to display.

Crone writes that in their debunking of sentimentality, the Judy and Punch shows provide an antithesis to melodrama. When villainy is victorious, as in the Judy and Punch shows, the moral order melodrama seeks to confirm is shattered.[191] By incorporating little Punch shows into his narratives, Dickens provides a welcome counterweight to sentimentality, yet juxtaposing it with the moral metal of characters like Arthur and Amy.

Dickens himself sought comfort in the puppet-booth as a child, and Crone notes that he calls them 'extravagant reliefs' in a letter to Mary Tyler.[192]

> It is possible, I think, that one secret source of pleasure very generally derived from this performance, … is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstance that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about, without any pain or suffering.[193]

When the wife-beating character walks onto the stage or into a novel, the 'knockings about', however, cause quite a different effect. Whereas the impersonal and inanimate rendering through a doll will appear funny, the violence in a human being will appear frightening. His violent ways extend to all communication with his wife: His severely distorted personality is evident in his twisted appearance:

> His neck was so twisted, that the knotted ends of his white cravat usually dangled under one ear; his natural acerbity and energy, always contending with a second nature of habitual repression, gave his features a swollen and suffused look; and all together, he had a weird appearance of having hanged himself at one time or another, and having gone about ever since halter and all, exactly as some timely hand had cut him down (30).

This is Dickens examining dead bodies in the mortuary again. The swollenness of Flintwinch's face might very well resemble that of a corpse, drowned and distorted. Carey

[189] Crone, *Violent Victorians,* 52-55.
[190] Crone *Violent Victorians,* 50, 51.
[191] Crone, *Violent Victorians,* 51.
[192] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, 26.
[193] Charles Dickens in a Letter to Mary Tyler 6 November 1849*, The Letters of Charles Dickens,* vol V*,* Pilgrim Edition, 640.

relates how Dickens, when given the chance, would sniff out the mortuaries of Paris and London and closely examine the corpses there.[194] The idea of crookedness is developed in all possible detail:

> The smoke came crookedly out of Mr. Flintwinch's mouth, as if it circulated through the whole of his wry figure and came back by his wry throat, before coming forth to mingle with the smoke from the crooked chimneys and the mists from the crooked river (568).

He speaks 'with a twist, as if his words had come out of him in his own wry shape' (155). He 'is twisting himself at the visitor again, … like some screw-machine that fell short of its grip' (302). Carey remarks that he leans to one side like the house.[195]

Mr. Flintwinch has forced the housemaid Affery into marriage, an arrangement giving Flintwinch a certification to maltreatment. Affery explains the 'convenient' arrangement with the superiority of 'them to clever ones' (32). He threatens her continually, orders her about, and commonly resorts to physical violence. Advancing upon her, 'she walking backward and he forward', he chases her up the narrow staircase, and 'took her by the throat and shook her till she was black in the face' (36). He continually threatens to give her 'such a dose' of beating, and tells her he will send her 'flying to the other end of the kitchen' (157), come 'tumbling down the banisters, and tumbling over you' (574). Flintwinch refers to the stairs as 'break-neck stairs' (153), and Affery's flight up the stairs with her monster-husband at her heals is nothing but nightmarish. According to Mrs. Clennam, there is 'a demon of anger' in him (152). Mr. Flintwinch, whose 'leathern face was not liable to many changes, preserved its immobility intact' (302). It calls to mind many of the other faces of *Little Dorrit* and, again, evokes the image of a theatre mask.

Flintwinch's brother is a nightmare-vision of a doppelganger, seen by Affery, but not identified as his brother until much later in the narrative. Ephraim is a 'lunatic-keeper', much the same as his brother, and has 'unsuccessfully speculated in lunatics' (653). When mentioning that his wife died, Flintwinch remarks: 'not that that was much; mine might have died instead, and welcome' (653). Miraculously, though, Affery has survived his repeated assaults, but she is deep into a paranoid neurosis and no longer able to distinguish the real world from nightmares. Being of the same metal, 'Double' had been 'over-roasting a patient to bring him to reason' (653). The grotesque and medieval image of a devil roasting sinners in hell rhymes well with the actions of Jeremiah, who waves at his brother with the snuffers (35) 'as if he would have enforced silence on him by putting them down his throat' (35).

[194] Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, 81.
[195] Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, 102.

Brian Rosenberg points to the centrality of the term 'shadow' and its representation of simulacra. In *Little Dorrit*, he asserts, shadows serve as 'images of replication, distortion and opposition'. [196] Shadows blur contours, eliminate details, and strengthen the impression of uncertainty. A shadow can be seen before the actual person is seen, foreshadowing an entrance. The distorted shadows of the inmates of the house are enlarged, creating frightening spectres on the wall:

> During many hours of the short winter days, however, when it was dusk there early in the afternoon, changing distortions of [Mrs. Clennam] in her wheeled chair, Flintwinch with his wry neck, or Mistress Affery coming and going, would be thrown upon the house wall that was over the gateway, and would hover there like shadows of a great magic lantern (151).

From an early age Dickens witnessed the productive of such a 'great magic lantern' from his seat in the theatre. The Victorian stage would use shadows and silhouettes most extensively for effect, but, more important, it would also be haunted by unwanted shadows on the backdrop. Due to the modestly developed lighting technique, the technician would have limited chances to control the shadows. Shadows would, of course, be a familiar companion in all rooms lit up by oil lamps and candles, creating sinister doppelgangers on the walls.

In creating his villains Dickens borrowed extensively from contemporary stage conventions, and particularly from melodrama. However, there is a distinct difference between the blatantly theatrical Rigaud and the more realistically rendered Mrs. Clennam. Because Rigaud is a 'clean' figure from melodrama he somehow dislocates himself from the other villains of the narrative and comes across as a kind of guest-star. For this reason his function in *Little Dorrit*, other than providing theatrical diversion as a satire on the dandy, remains somewhat elusive.

[196] Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows*, 43.

4. The hero and the comic double

Melodrama is closely related to the notion of suffering and pity and it similarly appears that happiness in Dickens's fictive world can only be obtained through self-abnegation and restraint. Put under emotional pressure Dickens's literary heroes and heroines 'explode' into almost violent outbursts of holy wrath, justified despair and passionate declarations of love. While the highly affective movement of the outburst clearly is indebted to melodrama, yet it seems to differ from other 'Dickensian theatricality' as it embodies a strong urge for the representation of something authentically human, and to express that humanity. These characters have no talent for feigning emotion; the most they can do is suppressing their true emotions, which is also, in fact, a kind of misrepresentation, but it happens in the endeavour to spare others. They come across as old children, innocent-wise, but without the playfulness of the child. Having paid the price of losing the ability to play and to play-act they gain the capacity to act. They react, but they do not play-act.

Arthur Clennam

In a dark, deteriorating world Arthur Clennam wanders, 'a waif and stray everywhere' (16), striving to sort out his place among the human forms he meets. In vain he tries to communicate with them because most of the figures are not equipped like him, with a reflective mind. The first encounter with Arthur Clennam renders him nameless. He is referred to as 'the second speaker' and 'the other' (13 and14), later as 'Nobody'. The 'otherness' of Arthur clings to him through a narrative crowded with figures of striking one-dimensionality: As Arthur has never learned how to unfold his person, he remains the spectator as he witnesses the other characters' incessant self-manifestation and role-playing. His seeming guiding maxim 'hold back' gives the other characters their 'self-seeking' display. He lends ear to them all, he *listens* and *watches* and *wonders.* Arthur's general inability to act, contrasts greatly with the eloquence of his inner voice.

Clennam's state of mind in Chapter III merges with the 'dismal scene' of a London Sunday ruled by killjoy evangelists. As the unnerving church-bells finally stop, Arthur ironically exclaims: 'Thank Heaven!' (24). In the 'dingy glass of window' he sees people like himself, who 'look out hopelessly at the sky as the rain fell thicker and faster' (25). His

childhood Sundays, ruled by a mother 'stern of face and unrelenting of heart', have been a row of 'unserviceable bitterness and mortification' (24). On his return home, this 'broken Odysseus, he returns not to a faithful wife but to an all-too faithful mother'.[197] He tells his mother that he cannot say his 'forty years have been profitable or pleasant to myself, or any one; but I have habitually submitted, and I only ask you to remember it' (38). He insists that she reveals if 'someone may have been grievously deceived, injured, ruined' (39), and if 'reparation can be done to any one' (40). Arthur's feeling of guilt is 'so vague and formless that it might be the result of a reality widely remote from his idea of it' (380). The feeling of guilt and his wish to make amends makes him more human and adds to his sincerity. He 'is responsively and convincingly stunted by environment, and extricates himself slowly and exhaustedly', Barbara Hardy notes.[198] Even the rain, leaving 'thousands of fresh scents in the countryside', 'develops only foul stale smells' in the polluted city (26). His depression is total; Arthur 'could not feel more depressed and cast away if he had been in the wilderness' (136) and sees his existence as futile: 'How soon I too shall pass through such changes, and be gone!'(140) His old room in his mother's house, being even 'uglier and grimmer than the rest, a place of banishment for the worn-out furniture', has 'a crippled wardrobe, a lean set of fire irons like the skeleton of a set deceased' (31). His one tender memory of a girl he once loved had 'soared out of his gloomy life and into the bright glories of fancy and together with all the other wants of his life, turned him into a dreamer – after all' (33).

Brian Rosenberg sees Arthur Clennam and Pip as David Copperfield's 'most direct ascendant, though each is even more openly self-divided and more conscious of his self-division.'[199] If David Copperfield's task is one of growing up, Arthur Clennam's is the opposite, namely that of conquering the childhood he never had. He is like an old man in the corner, allowing the world to go by because he no longer has the capacity to interfere with it: 'As it was, the rain fell heavily, drearily' (81). He even states 'I have no will' (17). Arthur's paralysis and depression clearly indicates his strong kinship with Shakespeare's melancholy hero, yet his sense of alienation anticipates the anti-hero of the realistic novel. His resemblance to Hamlet gives Arthur a theatrical dimension per se, but he also distinctly resembles the hero of an urban melodrama described by Michael Booth in his work *English Melodrama*: Constantly in a fix, melodrama's hero typically 'wanders perilously in distant

[197] John J. Glavin, 'Little Dorrit as Poor Theatre: Dickens through Grotowski', in *Dramatic Dickens, ed. by* Carol Hanbury McKay (Eastleigh and London: The Macmillan Press Limited 1989), 110-124
[198] Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens*, 17.
[199] Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows*, 108.

land' and languishes in prison, 'half dead', where the heroine eventually saves him.[200] The dangers of the metropolis prove too great a challenge to the weak-willed man, and he is particularly likely to submit to the evils of gambling. The melodramatic hero is not particularly intelligent; 'but confused, muddled, and extraordinarily gullible'.[201] He is ignorant of evil, rather like Adam in Paradise before the fall. However, the hero can spend most of the play entangled in the cunning of the villain, who steals his money and property, and 'outwits him with greatest ease until the final sensational and usually accidental reversal of fortune.'[202] The almost magic quality of money, with its sudden disappearance and equally sudden reappearance, is typical of the melodrama plot. Indeed, much of the theatricality of melodrama relies upon stark contrasts of plot and characterization. Reversals and role-playing, inherently theatrical in its nature, are among its core traits. *Little Dorrit*'s hero is definitely not a gambler, but all the same he ends up staking his money on the wrong horse, with its subsequent fatal consequences. Money threatens to spoil it for the two lovers at the end, a fact that gives Arthur, refusing Amy's fortune, a final mark of decorum. It also questions, however, the power of their love. The slowness of Arthur threatens to disengage him mentally, but he is saved by a never failing talent for heroic empathy. What stirs his energy is exactly a damsel, or any such weakling, in distress. The first time we see a spark of energy in Arthur is when they carry off poor Cavaletto to the hospital. He does indeed possess the impassioned indignation of the melodramatic hero, but in a more 'orderly' manner.

One major villain of *Little Dorrit*, Mr. Merdle, sees to the disappearance of Arthur's money. The nightmare vision of governmental administration, The Circumlocution Office, provides entanglement in abundance. Entanglement indeed seems to haunt the plot accordingly: Money disappeared long before the birth of Amy Dorrit and much of it is never accounted for. Hidden wills and concealed parentage, elements typical of the melodrama, occur in abundance.

Typically, the hero is 'helped out by the comic man'.[203] In *Little Dorrit*, the whole novel is helped out by the brilliant comical portrayals, and without them the novel would be a desert journey. Arthur finds himself involved with so many characters from the realm of theatre that the theatricality 'rubs off' on him, so to speak. Flora Finching 'necessarily recalled to him his life, with all its misdirection and little happiness' (13). Though obviously

[200] Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1965), 17.
[201] Booth, *English Melodrama*, 17-18.
[202] Booth, *English Melodrama*, 17.
[203] Booth, *English Melodrama*, 18.

deeply in love with her in his youth, he has reached a stage of depression where even the good moments are dismissed: ‘So long, so bare, so blank. No childhood; no youth, except for one remembrance; the one remembrance proved, only that day, to be a piece of folly’ (139). In the chapter XXVI named ‘NOBODY’S STATE OF MIND’, Arthur congratulates himself on his ‘wise decision firmly to restrain himself from loving Pet’ as he would have ‘lived in much perplexity involving difficult struggles with his own heart’ (257). Then the narrator comments directly on Arthur’s nature: ‘A generous nature is not prone to strong aversions, and is slow to admit them even dispassionately; but when it finds ill-will gaining upon it and can discern between-whiles that its origin is not dispassionate, such a nature becomes distressed’ (257). The statement is interesting, not only for pinpointing the ‘distress’ Arthur feels by being emotionally involved, but also for repeating the notion of ‘dispassion’: Being subject to an existential crisis, he has problems not only in locating and defining his own feelings, but also in accepting them and addressing them. Only melancholy is ‘trustworthy’, because an inherently pessimistic outlook on life will never cause disappointment: Had Arthur not made the ‘vigorous resolution’ against ‘falling in love with Pet’ ‘he would have been that night unutterably miserable’ (177). Arthur’s inability to act has followed him from his early youth: He could not reach out for his happiness then; he cannot now. When Mr. Meagles fancies Arthur being married to Pet’s dead sister, Arthur’s feeling of his life being past comes to a chilling climax.

When ‘Pet’s noble-hearted friend’ realizes how close he was to winning the misguided girl’s hand ‘a heavy stone fell into the well of Clennam’s heart and swelled the water to his eyes’ (282). The reader is not fooled, but the narrator’s cat-and-mouse game bereaves Arthur of some of his authenticity as it demasks him as, even inwardly, two-faced. Mr. Meagles, who is unable to give Arthur his living daughter, fancies that Arthur belongs to his dead child: ‘I feel tonight, my dear fellow, as if you had loved my dead child very tenderly and had lost her when she was like what Pet is now’ (284). Arthur indeed wanders in the valley of death, and, like Hamlet, he plays with the idea of taking his own life: ‘it might be better to float away monotonously, like the river, and compound for its insensibility to happiness with its insensibility to pain’ (169). Yet the many lyrical passages where Arthur philosophizes on nature lift him into the light sphere of ‘fancy’. ‘He had that sense of peace, and of being lightened of a weight of care, which country quiet awakens in the breasts of dwellers in towns’ (297). The ‘divine calm’ of nature offers fundamental metaphors to a troubled mind, and the voice of Amy, as she reads to him in his illness, merges with the

'great Nature'. He is 'listening to the voice as it read to him, heard in it all that great Nature was doing, heard in it all the soothing songs she sings to man' (679).

The extraordinary twosome of the narrative construction of *Little Dorrit* greatly colours the conception of the character of Arthur: His voice steadily merges with the narrator's voice and gives him a unique insight. The result is less that the narrator merges with his story; but rather that the narrator pulls Arthur out of the spectacle and places him on the narratorial side of matters. He seems to hold a middle position in the composition; not fully integrated into the narrative. Through his evaluation (and devaluation) of all the other characters, he keeps them on a leash, so to speak, giving him the position of a circus director.

In *The Dickens Theatre* Robert Garis points out the discrepancy between the intended earnestness in Arthur and the irony and even sarcasm in the tone of some passages in Chapter III:[204] 'At such a happy time, so propitious to the interests of religion and morality … Arthur Clennam, … sat in the window of a coffee house on Ludgate Hill' (23). Similarly, he goes on to ask 'what more could the overworked population need on a Sunday? Clearly they could want nothing but a stringent policeman' (23). Garis claims the sarcasm serves to confuse its tone and possibly gives a more varied quality to his portrayal 'than was intended by the author'. Clennam is gloomy and depressed, Garis points out, and 'his mind can by no means manage the confident poise of irony, much less the explicit humorous intention of these particular examples of Dickensian humour'. But then, Garis points out, we do not expect to find consistency in the 'Dickens theatre'.[205] Barbara Hardy notes that in Arthur we find a character 'with more inner life than we have found up to now'.[206]

In spite of Nobody's apparent flaws, and even before Pet refers to his 'noble heart', twice in the same passage, Arthur soon acquires marks of nobility. It is his quality of heart, and his modest heroic actions, that make him a gentleman. As he wanders aimlessly towards St. Paul's, 'he could not have felt more depressed and cast away if he had been in the wilderness' (136). He luckily stumbles upon the wounded Cavaletto and throws himself into his rescue with great enthusiasm and exemplary parental care. Knightly, 'stooping on one knee at his work' (137), he assures his patient: 'I won't leave you till you shall be well taken care of. Courage!'(138). The courage he so misses himself, he now wants to insert into Cavaletto. The theatrical tableau with its highly charged language takes us right onto the

[204] Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, 167.
[205] Garis, *The Dickens Theatre,* 169.
[206] Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens*, 17.

Victorian stage. He later refers to 'the solicitude and compassion of the adventure' (139). The wretchedness of Cavaletto has triggered his compassion, and suddenly he has all the striking power and direction characteristic of the melodramatic hero. Indeed, he slowly acquires all the traits of a 'gentleman', a term used most dubiously in *Little Dorrit*.[207] The notion was subject to ambiguous interpretation in Victorian society at large, and one in constant change. The subtle and changing balance between social and moral attributes, Gilmour states, gave gentlemanliness its fascination.[208]

Arthur's 'first article in his code of morals was that he must begin in practical humility, with looking well to his feet on Earth, and that he could never mount on wings of words to Heaven. Duty on Earth, restitution on Earth, action on Earth; these first steep steps upward' (268) In Amy Dorrit he finds his ideal and his salvation. His link to 'the sacred' is his love for Amy, whose total lack of posing questions about her existence, however toilsome, elevates her to a state of saints: Had not Arthur seen in her 'patience, self-denial, self-subdual, the noblest generosity of the affections?' (602).[209] Through Amy's innocence the lost childhood of Arthur is yet to be won: From Amy he hears fairy-tales, not the stifling repetitive doomsday prophesies of his mother's distortions of the Bible.

Arthur's hero status, then, is first and foremost derived from what he *seeks,* not from what he *does*. The ideal he seeks is absolute goodness. The disillusionment of his life can only be cured through the radiance of a 'pure soul'. Little Dorrit is 'a human incarnation of divine goodness', 'giving form to his world and an orientation to his life'.[210] His earnestness, honesty and deep concern with finding out who has suffered from his parents' actions are all part of the authenticity of Arthur. The fact that he suffers innocently for his parents' ill doings glorifies his quest further. He can settle for no less than absolute goodness, this Grail's Knight. Initially, he cannot receive Amy's love 'because it would be a violation of innocence and purity'.[211] In the domestic sphere in which Amy wanders it is easy to find the role of someone who seeks to be good. In the business and legal world where he seeks to do good he quickly becomes entangled in the mischief created by people who do not seek to do good for others but for themselves.

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[207] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels,* 229.
[208] Gilmour, Robin, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Society*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981) 4.
[209] Interestingly, this characterization of the heroine also links her directly to the slowly changing ideal of the gentleman, described in Robin Gilmour's *The Idea of The Gentleman in the Victorian Novel.*
[210] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,1958), 246.
[211] Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, 185.

John Chivery

However weak-legged, John Chivery has strong ties to his more fortunate double, Arthur Clennam. They constitute each other's contrast, but they also have much in common. They both adore Little Dorrit and they both mistake her for another: John for his wife, Arthur for his daughter. The ludicrous apparition of John juxtaposes the reserved and restrained Arthur. Where Arthur contains his tears, John pours them out. Where Arthur is oblivious of Amy's love, John is pretentious. Arthur looks through the Dorrits' 'family fiction' of gentility whereas John is prey to it and believes himself to be inferior to them. By bouncing off, so to speak, each other's one-sidedness they supply each other with identification marks. John is vital to the characterization of Arthur, in displaying his own shortcomings and abnormalities. Through them he draws attention to Arthur's 'straightness' and hero-qualities. Kincaid points to these 'units' of characters who live in mutual dependency: 'they exist in relation, in incorporation; not isolation.'[212]

However, trying to make head and tail of a character like John Chivery is a confusing enterprise. Initially, 'we come to the novels equipped to detect a real essence behind that role, a true face behind the mask. But in Dickens we are forced to wonder'.[213] James Kincaid appropriately divides Dickens's characters into two categories derived from the two lexical meanings of the word *perform*: The one group *perform* their duties, the others are the *performers*:

> This second group of performers needs no core for action, no plan, no casualty; they use whatever comes to hand for an impromptu skit, full-scale drama, or opera… The earnest performers have plans and proceed as best they can along straight lines; they struggle to constitute what we think of as plot; the playful performers float free, improvising whatever composition they find to their fancy; they write anti-plots'.[214]

The question is, James Kincaid writes, whether we are dealing with a 'they', and 'if we attempt to 'posit a real being', behind the performance 'we find ourselves so helplessly bobbing about in deep waters that we begin to see that we have cast off in the wrong boat, '.[215] When John Chivery, 'the sentimental son of a turnkey' (177), is plonked onto the scene we have already become well acquainted with the book's irresolute hero and gladly witness

[212] Kincaid 'Performance, Roles and the Nature of Self in Dickens' in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. by Carol Hanbery McKay, (Eastleigh and London: The Macmillan Press Limited 1989), 20.
[213] Kincaid, 'Performance, Roles and the Nature of Self in Dickens' in *Dramatic Dickens*, 19.
[214] Kincaid 'Performance, Roles and the Nature of Self in Dickens', 12.
[215] Kincaid, 'Performance, Roles and the Nature of Self in Dickens', 12.

the young suitor's brisk proposal to Amy Dorrit. Dickens gives broad-stroked descriptions of his carnivalesque epitaph-maker.

> Young John was small of stature with rather weak legs and very weak light hair. One of his eyes (perhaps the one that used to peep through the keyhole) was also weak, and looked larger than the other, as if it couldn't collect itself. Young John was gentle likewise. But he was great of soul. Poetical, expansive, faithful' (178).

The greatness of his soul is ironically juxtaposed to his modest intellectual faculties, something that his 'very weak light hair' is evidence of. John's shivery foundation and his 'weak eye' that 'looked larger than the other, as if it couldn't collect itself' (178) turn him irrevocably into a highly comical figure. Neither can the rest of Young John collect 'itself', as his childhood affection for Amy has matured into adult desire. Having admired Amy for years through the keyhole of the prison-gate, John's lack of courage in wooing has now frustrated him to a stage where he has 'flown at the customers' of his mother's tobacco shop (179). Finally this peeping Tom finds the time ripe for a thrust at what he takes to be his own trophy. In young Chivery's imagination there is 'a beautiful propriety' in the matching of a lock keeper to an inmate's daughter, and in due course they will 'glide down the stream of time, in pastoral domestic happiness' (178). Dickens, indeed, intended that kind of blessing for Amy, but not with John Chivery as co-glider. His sense of power at having the key to the lock is nourished in his childhood game of 'locking her up in corners, and counterfeit letting her out for real kisses' (178). Through his prostrate devotion and his childhood friendship he seems to feel he has a right to his 'sweet nursling of the Fairies' (178). Characteristically, John has not considered once what Amy feels, he is only interested in his own feelings and sees them as sufficient reason for Amy to accept him. His immature attitude mirrors Arthur's careful consideration, when speaking of his feelings for Pet, that what matters is 'what she thought' (165).

Because he is drawn in such broad strokes and has so many clownish traits his characterization does not ask to believable. Yet the narrator insists that the reader should see 'the very respectable' side of him (608). His sickly nature is comically expressed in his 'constant anticipation of his own death' as he, rejected, composes the inscriptions of his own tombstone.[216]

[216] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, 231

> Here lie the mortal remains of JOHN CHIVERY, never anything worth mentioning, Who died about the end of year one thousand eight hundred and six, Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last breath that the name AMY may be inscribed over his ashes, Which was accordingly directed to be done, By his afflicted Parents. (185)

Through these lofty concoctions the aspiring poet invokes the elevated atmosphere of a last goodbye and the dim reconciling light of the post-mortem. His attempts at self-aggrandizement, however, are effectively crushed by Amy's prompt refusal. Like Flora, John Chivery is mostly excess and rarely restraint, however humble. Not capable of the manly wrath, he keeps returning to 'holy indignation'. This stance, underscored by incessant repetitions, gives him a markedly infantile appearance (607). Fictional comic characters more often retort to indignation than to anger when wronged.[217] When maximized, indignation will turn into hysteria and is much less threatening than anger because it is directed inward. It can be loud and call for acting-out, but it is basically non-aggressive. Being done on stage the comic actor would use loud breathing to convey indignation, indicative of loss of control. Amy, by comparison, is never indignant; she resorts either to sorrowfulness or, occasionally, hysteria in the form of fainting. John Chivery, like a teenager, bites his fingers (605). The general impression of the whole man points away from traditionally conceived masculinity. When Arthur tells John 'you speak like a man', it is with the admiration of someone who sees a child rise to the occasion and perform an adult act (608).

However, in Book II the carnival atmosphere of the first encounters with John Chivery has been replaced by one of sadness and pity: We no longer laugh at this Lackland who loses it all. The merciless treatment of John when he comes to offer William Dorrit cigars strips the former of his clownish traits and turns him into another victim on the Dorrit altar. Apart from letting Mr. Dorrit unfold his full pathology, Dickens reduces John to a state of absolute misery where the reader's pity supersedes that of ridicule. His degradation calls to mind the unfortunate courting clown Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and we are likely to agree with the ill-fated lover: 'There never was a man thus wronged' (4.2.29). Ironically, Dickens awards John the task of revealing the truth about Amy's feelings for Arthur. As he rises above himself to reveal Amy's love for Arthur he exercises an act bordering on chivalry: His legs, however weak, carry the weight of a gentleman. In a tear-dripping scene where John reaches his height of melodramatic indignation he accuses Clennam of leading him on and pretending not to know of Amy's love for him. To emphasize his self-solemnity Dickens has

[217] The comedy of the character Helena of Shakespeare's *Midsummernight's Dream* relies heavily on indignation.

chosen a pattern similar to German syntax for the character of Chivery, sounding curiously stilted and unnatural in English. The concoction is also a parody of legalese rhetoric, or exaggeratedly formal style:

> If it was the last word I had to speak, against that vortex with my utmost powers I strove, and out of it I came. I argued that if I had been rude, apologies was due, and those apologies without demeaning I did make … Do not be so base as to deny that dodge you do, and thrown me back upon myself you have! (607)

He only applies that kind of grammar in this particular scene, and the linguistic peculiarity is a strange deviation from his normal speech. This shatters the consistency of the characterization further. Being affected by the cruelty of his last appearance it is hard for the reader to regain the sense of comedy initially connected with his character. Having laughed loudly at this low-class character a number of times, however, it is almost as if Dickens, by treading him completely down, seeks to restore his authenticity. The portrait of John Chivery is, after all, 'a warm, generous, and inclusive variety' of parody. [218]

Flora Finching

Little Dorrit is crowded with deviant women. Some belong to a Victorian fictional prototype of redundant women, like the pattering Flora Finching and the starkly mad Mr. F's Aunt. Others, like Miss Wade and Tattycoram evade this stereotype, but what they all have in common is their 'lack' of a husband and their lack of ability to conform to the Victorian bourgeois standards of femininity.

The pattering widow is not Dickens's invention. In her study *Dickens, Novel Reading and the Victorian Popular Theatre* Deborah Vlock observes that such representations of feminine patter existed on the stage from the beginning of the 18th century, when it also entered the dictionary as a derivation from 'paternoster'.[219] The Victorian bourgeois defined itself by a restricted form of 'standard' speech and deviators of all kinds belonged socially outside. Redundant speech, or patter, is idiomatically tied to the single woman and defines her as unintelligent, eccentric and superfluous. Arthur Murphy's comedy *The Old Maid* from 1761 presents Miss Harlow, an 'old maid' still unmarried at forty-three. We learn that her 'temper is really grown so very sour' and what a great deal of good it would have done her

[218] Tore Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination*, 17.
[219] Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novelreading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 94.

temper 'had she married early'. Her brother in law professes outright that 'an old maid in the house is the devil'.[220]

Vlock differentiates between the *street patter*, generally spoken by lower-class men and *spinster patter*, the 'repetitive, illogical, under-punctuated, and redundant monologues' delivered by stage spinsters and widows.[221] One of the first artistic genres to dramatize patter was the operatic character of the *buffa*, performing a breathlessly fast virtuosic singing pattern designed to evoke laughter.[222] Stage widows and old spinsters spoke rapidly and unintelligibly and their eccentricity often seemed to verge on madness. The idea of female celibacy being a cause of madness was common; of which the truly deviant Mr F's Aunt is an example.[223]

Dickens's reader will have recognized Flora as belonging to the many Victorian fictional widows and spinsters, of which Mrs. Gaskell's Alice Wilson in *Mary Barton* and Jane Austen's Miss Bates from *Emma* are but two examples.[224] The spinster had no defined social role; her lack of husband and offspring status-defined her as unfortunate and marginal. Being denied an education, she would have to look to a brother, a father or a more distant relative for her support; she was thus an economic burden to society. Unmarried women were marginalized at best, shunned at worst. An article written by William Rathbone Greg in 1864 proposes the forced transportation of such 'idle' and 'unnatural' females. The terms 'widow' was conflated with 'spinster', and both were synonymous with 'redundant woman'.[225] The widow, in addition to being man-less, was a potential threat to male dominance, as she now possessed her own property, was legally autonomous and less inclined to be subject to male control.

In his portraiture of Flora Dickens may have drawn on the sketches of his friend, the comic actor Charles Mathews (1776-1835). Mathews specialized in impersonation and caricature one-man shows, the renowned 'monopolylogues', and he taught Dickens much about the comic voice. Vlock claims to have found prototypes of Dickens's characters in Mathews' one-man shows in 'At Home With Charles Mathews' and amongst them several pattering women.[226]

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[220] Arthur Murphy,*The Old Maid* in*The Way to Keep Him and five other plays by Arthur Murphy* (New York: New York University Press 1956), 94, 96, 99.
[221] Vlock, *Dickens, Novelreading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre,* 96.
[222] Vlock, *Dickens, Novelreading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre,* 99, 104.
[223] Vlock, *Dickens, Novelreading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre,* 170-72.
[224] Vlock, *Dickens, Novelreading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*, 101.
[225] Vlock, *Dickens, Novelreading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*, 165.
[226] Vlock, *Dickens, Novelreading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*, 129.

However, the immediate inspiration for his pattering widow seems to have been Dickens's renewed acquaintance with his youth-time sweetheart Maria Beadnell. She was a two year older daughter of a bank employed senior clerk, the younger of three sisters and the pet of the household. Dickens courted her ardently for three years, fervently trying to improve his financial and social state, but he fell through: The relationship was effectively put to end by Maria's parents, leaving the young lovers devastated.[227] Out of the blue, in the winter of 1855, Dickens received a letter from Maria, now Mrs. Winther. Being in the middle of marital frustration, he took up an impassioned correspondence with her. The eloquent letter from Dickens clearly attempts to conjure up the emotions of their youth romance and he bluntly confesses that the sight of her handwriting comes upon him with an influence he 'cannot express'. Further, he opened her letter with a touch of 'David Copperfield when he was in love'.[228] Sweeping away all protestations of lost youthful merits, he insists on meeting her, only to have his dreams crushed; again. No virgin Maria turns up, but a stout, chatty middle-aged woman. Whether it struck him that time might have changed the appearance of his one-time beau is unknown; the unfortunate woman went out of Dickens's life and into his new novel as Flora Finching, securing her an eternal life, most likely, in his fiction.[229]

Flora, albeit the widow of a presumably prosperous man, again lives with her father Mr. Casby, and childishly insists on being called 'Miss Flora'. In spite of her flowery name she has no children, but takes care of Mr. F's Aunt, her late husband's 'legacy'. According to herself her married life had been one of moderate happiness 'it was not ecstasy but it was comfort' (238). As such, she still depends on men for a livelihood and, more important, where to direct her efforts. The aunt's 'extreme severity and grim taciturnity' is a cruel mockery of 'the good creature' and her lack of children to thrive on her generous and kind personality (131). Flora's lack of restraint threatens her surroundings with complete conversational and emotional chaos, and her lack of logic places her well into caricature. Even when she is momentarily observant, she is not allowed a moment in the sun: She had found it out 'with the quick perception of a cleverer woman' (128). Her breathless speech, delivered 'at astonishing speed', and her failure ever to 'come to a full stop' (126) emphasizes her anxiety about her worth, and her constant nervous chatter, delivered at a 'galloping pace', attempting to consume her surroundings. The long harangue starting 'Really so sorry that I should happen to be so late this morning', and ending half a page later with 'I shall be quite vexed' (235), is

[227] Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens. A Life* (London: Penguin Group 2011), 244-245.
[228] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition vol XII ,ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press Oxford, 1993), 532-533.
[229] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life,* 266-269.

such an extravagant exercise in circuitous speech that it threatens to exhaust even the most ardent of Dickens's readers.

Her gestures, however, are those of melodrama; large and externalized: She 'clasped her hands, fell into a tremble and shed tears of sympathy and pleasure' and 'launched out among the cups and saucers into a wonderful flow of tears and speech' (347). Her speech is interspersed with cries and screams (128) and she even lapses into theatre metaphors: '…one hope I wish to express ere yet the closing scene draws in' (682). By attempting the 'high' style of tragedy, she aims at ennobling her own personal trauma, but 'dressed' for comedy she remains the clown.

She tries repeatedly to re-establish the romance of the past by continually alluding to it: 'there *was* a time…' (126). Coquet remarks as 'oh, what a traveller you are' (127) coupled with persistent 'old glances' and 'looks of mysterious meaning' (127) are obvious come-ons. They are even more obviously a target for the narrator's contempt as she, a widow of faded beauty, has no right to indicate her sexual needs. The virtuous Arthur 'looked at his hat' and, being given another glance, he fails to know 'what to do with it' (126,127). Flora proves 'very fond of porter' and at dinner Arthur observes that she is big on 'substantial grounds' (132). To such a degree is Arthur abhorred by her grossness that he even starts to wonder if her former attractiveness had been a product of his own youthful, virile imagination.[230]

Discussing Flora Finching I can barely avoid returning to her grotesque trail, Mr. F's Aunt. Though the narrator states that her hostility is 'traceable to no association of ideas' (131), the aggressiveness of this 'winegariest' of spinsters can easily be seen as an embodiment of Flora's hidden bitterness towards Arthur, who failed to stand up to his mother and fight for his and Flora's love, stressing that she 'suffered enough' for her mother's separating the two (33). Flora is in her right to blame him for his compliance, but instead she insists on offering Arthur 'one last explanation' why it all went wrong for the two. She blames herself: 'what was I to do?' (128). Rather than taking any blame on himself, Arthur gallantly excuses Flora (129). He shuns the prospect of reconciliation, rejects her confidence and remains passive. All her efforts at reaching the person 'Arthur, Mr. Clennam far more proper' are being rejected and she 'comes to a full stop at last' (129).

For all her nonsensical tittering, Flora displays considerable knowledge of herself and the tragedy of her life. She speaks to Amy of her lost romance, acknowledging her reduced state: 'such is life you see my dear and yet we do not break but bend' (236). Her self-

[230] Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language,* 75.

medication consists of 'some brown liquid that smelt like brandy' supplied by her 'medical man' (236), but rather than withdrawing into complete passivity and muteness she defiantly insists on having her part in some of life's pleasures. The sorrowful in her portrayal is indeed blended with 'a sense of the comical' (129).

Flora makes her last appearance with a pie, 'offered by the hand of true regard', admitting that she has been a victim of 'fancy's fair dreams' and wishes the two lovers well (682). Clutching on to the past she may join the long line of Stewart Garret's 'escape artists' who only survive the drudgery and trials of life through self-deluding daydreaming. In Flora's case, he argues, the 'reserves of imagination are hopelessly unbalanced, the fancy, spoken and otherwise, indeed bankrupt'.[231] Yet interestingly, rather than escaping, Flora takes full responsibility for her own life. She conducts the house of her father, looks after her husband's horrible aunt and generously bestows her care upon anyone who comes in her way, even her rival. Seen from this perspective, Flora is Amy's sister, not her contrast. However lacking in restraint, her goodness of heart gives her an authentic core beneath her diversionary chatter.

However marginalized, Flora Finching plays a vital part in the composition of *Little Dorrit*, not only in supplying comic relief in a troubled world, but also in offering a contrast to the heroine: The corpulent whimsical widow is a perfect antithesis to the virtuous petite seamstress Amy Dorrit.

Amy Dorrit

Little Dorrit is the only novel by Charles Dickens to carry the name of a woman in its title. However little, the heroine grew on her creator to the extent where she replaced the original working title, *Nobody's Fault*, with her own.[232] With a Christian name resembling the French *aimer*, Amy is meant to grow on the reader accordingly. Her persistently angelic quality has made critics suggest that she may have been modelled on the younger sister of the author's wife, Mary Hogarth, who died at the age of seventeen, and to whom Dickens was very close .[233] Shortly after her sudden death Dickens wrote: 'I have lost the dearest friend I ever had ... She had not a single fault, and was in life almost as far above the foibles and vanity of her sex

[231] Garrett Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of the Imagination*(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1974), 183-185.
[232] Paul Schlicke, ed, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1999, 2011), 343.
[233] Juliet John, *The Melodramatic Villain: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 229. John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, 158.

and age as she is now in Heaven'.[234] Amy seems almost to be drawn out of the shadows and into the world of the living:

> It was not easy to make out Little Dorrit's face; she was so retiring, plied her needle in such removed corners, and started away so scared if encountered on the stairs. But it seemed to be a pale transparent face, though not beautiful in feature, its soft hazel eyes excepted. A delicately bent head, a tiny form, a quick little pair of busy hands, and a shabby dress – it must needs have been very shabby to look at all so, being so neat – were Little Dorrit where she sat at work (45).

Dickens's accentuation of Little Dorrits 'meagre' figure has been a provocation to feminist critics who see Amy's lack of physical maturity as topical of Victorian writers' rejection of sexual adultness in women.[235] In her study *Dickens, Women and Language* Patricia Ingham sees in what she classifies as 'nubile girls' 'an over-insistence on lack of physicality in respect of female characteristics'. The frequent emphasis on 'slightness' and the incessant repetition of the adjective 'little' projects an almost pre-pubertal girl.[236] According to Ingham, the word *little* implies a patronizing quality, as if its force is minor.[237]

However, Little Dorrit's over-accentuated littleness is vital both to the melodramatic structure of *Little Dorrit* and to the highlighting of essential qualities in the adult Amy: While carrying the innocence of childhood into adulthood, she has equally been forced into the 'care-laden world' of adulthood at a too young age (59). At eight, when her mother died, Amy had decided to be 'something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest' (59). Her littleness, then, is both a figure of her child-like qualities so treasured by Dickens, and an opposition to the burden she carries. The insignificant physical stature of 'the little ghost' (72) is also paramount to the significance she carries in the overriding theme of the novel: The liberating potential of self-sacrificial love. She is the innermost Russian doll, so to speak, hidden within all the shells of empty largeness of the other characters.

In Patricia Ingham's description of the 'nubile girl', Little Dorrit numbers among the unmarried women without experience and knowledge: 'For the blank page to remain 'unsullied' they must avoid not only experience but knowledge.'[238] Inexperienced though she is there are also strong indications of Amy's adulthood and sexual maturity: Being shut out of the Marshalsea she spends the whole night in the street, guarding herself and Maggie against

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[234] Charles Dickens to Richard Johns 31 May 1837, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition vol. I, 263.
[235] Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, women and language*, 18.
[236] Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, 18.
[237] Ingham *Dickens, Women andLanguage*, 19.
[238] Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, 18.

'slinking men ' and drunkards. A prostitute, 'neither ugly nor wicked-looking', comes after them, and in 'no naturally coarse voice' asks: 'What are you doing with the child?' (148). Maggie's unintentionally piercing answer 'What are you doing to yourself?' might as well have been 'What are you doing to the child in yourself?' (148). Hoping for a moment's deliverance from her misery through the touch of a non-judging child, the woman wants to kiss Amy, but is shocked by what she discovers:

> 'Why, my God!', she said, recoiling, 'you're a woman!'
> 'Don't mind that!' said Little Dorrit', clasping one of the hands that had suddenly released hers. 'I am not afraid of you.' 'Then you'd better be,' she answered. 'Have you no mother?' 'No'. 'Father?' 'Yes, a very dear one.' 'Go home to him and be afraid of me. Let me go'. 'You are kind and innocent; but you can't look at me out of a child's eyes. I should never have touched you but that I thought you were a child.' And with a strange wild cry she went away. (148-149)

Amy's wish to connect with the prostitute tells us that she is not repulsed or frightened by the implications of the prostitute's business; neither is she unknowing. Neither is she incapable of jealousy, as she is comparing herself to her rival Pet Meagles, 'o how unlike me!' (370). Arthur Clennam will not recognize this, much the same way as a father may fail to see the sexual maturity in his daughter because it threatens his position as father and makes his role unstable. J. Hillis Miller states that 'Clennam's mistake is to identify Little Dorrit's goodness with childhood. It derives from that indeed, but Little Dorrit's mystery is that she has been able, unlike any other character in the novel, to carry the innocence and spontaneous love from childhood into adult life.'[239] Taking the physical world for face value can be a trap: Little Dorrit is not a child. Although preoccupied with physiognomy, which was typical of melodrama, this may be Dickens's rejection of an inclination in his age to interpret literally what the eye observed.[240]

A further attempt at undermining Amy's prominent position in the novel is Joellen Masters's argument that Amy is a supporting, not a main character. Masters likens the character to the 19th century theatrical device of the *ficelle*, whose function was that of a thread to hold the narrative together.[241] Through her access to the different houses as a

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[239] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, 241

[240] In *Outlines of a New System of Physiognomy* the author J. W. Redfield sets out to 'read out a brief outline' on the subject of *Physiognomy* and its evidence of human character: 'The breadth of the lower jaw under the first two or small molar teeth, and next to the sign of violent love, as here represented, indicates the faculty of *Ardent Love'*. (London: Webb, Millington, and Co., 1852), 30.

[241] Joellen Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework': Female Agency and the Workhouse of Gender in Charles Dickens's Little Dorrit' in *Famine and* Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century, ed. by Beth Harris (Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company 2005), 54.

seamstress, she clearly is 'providing integral links to characters and episodes, and between the text and the reader'.[242] The latter is true enough, and it is also true that she appears only in twenty-two of the book's sixty-eight chapters. But neither does arithmetic prevent her from being the novel's heroine, 'a slender child in body, a strong heroine in soul' (322).

In his portrait of Little Dorrit Dickens carefully lays down his idealized view that 'female heroism originates in helping others'.[243] He obviously sees Amy's willingness to work as an asset and the whole image of his heroine revolves around this idea. Dickens's many working women, from Madeleine Bray in *Nicholas Nickleby* selling her miniatures to Lizzie in *Our Mutual Friend* rowing on the Thames, witness his approval of their abilities, but usually they settle in quiet and safe domesticity at the close of the narrative.[244] Fanny quite rightly states to Amy that she is 'a tranquil, domestic, home-loving girl' (205). Amy's occupation as seamstress may have challenged the Victorian idea of a privileged lady. Their work was unwanted and, in many bourgeois homes, superfluous. Sewing however, would be one occupation that all women felt familiar with, even the leisurely embroidery of the gentlewoman.[245] The other ladies in *Little Dorrit* occupy themselves with eating (Flora Finching), gossiping (Mrs. Merdle) and travelling (Pet Meagles) while sipping their tea or merely lying in a chaise longue. Fanny also works, although as a dancer. Amy's work, on the other hand, is an image of virtue: 'Delicately' bending her head and hiding her face and womanly forms, she resembles someone at prayer. The silent repetitive rhythm of the hand 'plying the needle' is indicative of Amy's strong contemplative capacities: In her apparent passivity she produces, stitch by stitch, the strong inner force that makes her endure a degraded existence and that eventually saves Arthur from a life in meaningless chaos.

Sewing also links her to the heroine of folk-myth, from fairy-tale princesses to the virtuous wife of Odysseus, Penelope. Through her storytelling Amy connects with the folklore of fairy tales; and she knows their imagery (244-46). Maggie thrives by their life-expanding idioms and 'sucks' them in as vital nourishment. The stories provide harsh reality with 'imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy would wither up'.[246] By placing her so emphatically within the realms of myth and folklore, the image of Amy demands even less a life-like rendering: When John adoringly names her 'sweet nursling of

[242] Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework' in *Famine Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, 56.
[243]Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework', 53.
[244]Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework', 55.
[245] Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework', 56.
[246] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, 365.

the Fairies', he is closer to an accurate description of her than any other offered. She belongs to a world of idealized forms.

Harris argues that 'Amy preserves what Dickens saw as the rotten fabric of patriarchy'.[247] She claims that Dickens's portrayal of the working Amy 'reinforces that hierarchy's notion of an essentially negligible female gender willing to excuse the personal and public failures of men.'[248] A different reading discovers that Little Dorrit has built a reasonably well-functioning *matriarchy* within her familial entity where patriarchy has, in fact, collapsed. Amy is the head of the family and together with her sister, not her brother, she supports the family. She encourages her father, tries to arrange for her brother to get employment and protects the family from degradation. Instead of raging in vain against an unjust fortune, she creates a meaningful existence within the realms of her confinement. Amy, the way I see her, anticipates the modern woman who earns her living *and* takes the main burden at home. The revolutionary social order suggested here is, however, set aside as soon as Dorrit is released from prison. He fails to acknowledge her massive efforts and his words to Mrs. General ring like a betrayal:

> I am troubled by noticing that Amy is not, so to speak, one of ourselves. She does not care to go about with us; she is lost in the society we have here; our tastes are evidently not her tastes. Which…is to say, in other words, that there is something wrong in – ha – Amy. (Find)

What ails Little Dorrit is that she feels utterly alienated as a traveller. She experiences the educational tour as a detachment from the purposeful existence that filled her previous life of servitude. She found that 'to have no work to do was strange, but not half so strange as having glided into a corner where she had no one to think for, nothing to plan and contrive, no cares of others to load herself with' (387). This loss of purpose leads to a loss of self and the beggars appear to her as the only 'realities of the day' (388). Working for her daily bread is her natural state and she is in no need of diversion. She suffers under the harsh reign of the etiquette-obsessed Mrs. General and feels uncomfortable with being a tourist-consumer of the comparatively dead art of cold marble statutes. (Cite) The role-playing of an assumed gentlewoman does not only appear unreal to Amy, but impossible. Indeed, 'her authenticity is paramount'.[249]

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[247] Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework', 54.
[248] Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework', 55.
[249] Tore Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination,* 187.

Suffering, and the ability to bear it, is an essential asset of the melodramatic heroine. Most of 'the necessary sentimentalism and pathos attaches to the heroine, who is the emotional core of melodrama and very often the storm centre of its action'.[250]

> By no means, … , is the heroine only the female equivalent of the hero. However, the melodramatic function of the heroine is an enlargement and intensification of that of the hero. Although, the weaker vessel in one sense, in another her strength is far greater, and she is far more persecuted, far more suffering. Her predicaments are extreme, her agonies immeasurable.[251]

The above-mentioned episode in the nightly streets of London is an example of 'a notable form of feminine distress in dramas of city life, and poor heroines can be reduced to begging and starving in the streets, often in a snow storm, and often accompanied by cold, hungry, and sick offspring'.[252] However patient and enduring, the melodramatic heroine will at certain times break out into passionate outbursts of wrath, justified despair or she will simply swoon.

Upon hearing of her father's changed fortunes, Amy lapses into a state of shock, conveniently giving Arthur his chance to engage in physical contact with her: 'He put an arm around her, seeing that she was likely to sink down' (347). The almost one page long build-up of suspense towards her swoon gives the narrator due chance to develop the erotic implications of Amy losing her usual control: 'As he kissed her, she turned her head towards his shoulder, and raised her arm towards his neck; and cried out 'Father! Father! Father!' and swooned away' (348). Tore Rem draws attention to the 18th century 'cult of sensibility where women's nerves came to be seen as naturally distinct from men's'.[253] This 'gendering of sensibility' might lead to a passive model for women's behaviour, as 'fainting is often a sign of direct submission to patriarchy'.[254] Yet, in some cases, such gendering of particularly delicate nerves might be turned to the women's advantage. By 'swooning' the woman leaves one level of consciousness, but possibly enters into another: Fainting is a 'small death', and done wilfully, it invests women with spiritual powers not mastered by the other sex. Thus, fainting can be 'potentially unsettling because it generally remains part of women's territory, perhaps open to occult manipulations which men cannot detect'.[255] Additionally, fainting is a way of craving 'time out', a clear indication of a refusal to comply: By demanding to terminate a situation by passing out, the woman takes a kind of control, within the limits of her awarded liberty, that is. Unquestionably, 'fainting is spectacle', and, with its invitation to

[250] Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama*, 30.
[251] Booth, *English Melodrama,* 30.
[252] Booth, *English Melodrama*, 129.
[253] Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination*, 163.
[254] Rem *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination,* 164
[255] Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination,* 164.

be acted upon: 'a perfect emblem for women in melodrama'.[256] It strikes me that in an age where sexual satisfaction was an accepted prerogative to men, fainting and hysteria gave women a chance of 'maximizing feeling'.

In line with the theories on Amy's self-abnegation, Master's comments that when Amy swoons it is only a fulfilment of what she has been trying to do all along: becoming invisible.[257] This is a curious statement, as fainting is prone to draw extraordinarily much attention. By losing her conscience Amy turns on the full lights of the house, and, for the first time draws acute attention to the fact that she is a fully normal and *adult* woman, capable of strong emotional reaction and expression. The presence of Arthur, naturally, gives her the chance of this kind of reaction. She is not likely to have fainted into the chubby arms of Flora Finching. And, as the reader has come to know Amy incapable of other misrepresentation than self-repression, this must be the real thing. In Amy's case, therefore, swooning is a breakthrough, a self-assertion of which we were led to believe her incapable. Melodrama, then, helps this character of angelic goodness become real. A similar language is employed when Amy hears of Tip's incarceration: 'She cried, with her clasped hands lifted above her head and said that it would kill their father if he ever knew it; and fell down at Tip's graceless feet' (64). The sudden outburst contrasts greatly with her usual silence and language of restraint. By 'pressuring the surface of reality', the physical hyperbole of the collapse endeavours to 'yield the full, true terms' of the story.[258]

The moments of highly charged emotional outbursts are like 'baptisms' into adulthood, and however contradictory, adds to the authenticity of Amy's characterization: If Fanny were to throw a similar act it would have the exact opposite effect; add to her artificiality and be a clear demonstration of her 'feigning'. Thus melodrama serves as a vehicle for both authentic and inauthentic expression, depending on how it is employed. It must be mentioned, however, that Amy is not completely incapable of 'feigning': When crying in her room she tells Maggie, falsely, that she lies down 'to ease my head' (243). In fact, it is her heart that is aching. She is, contrary to Arthur, fully aware that she is in love but will not admit to it, and meets Maggie 'with a more cheerful face than heart' (205). After 'swooning away', Amy is subsequently 'kneeling down and pouring out her thankfulness with uplifted hands' (348). The image, a highly stylized dramatic expression, is additionally charged for its evocation of the divine. To a modern reader it may ring pathetic,

[256] Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination,* 164.
[257] Masters, 'Let Herself out to do Needlework': Female Agency and the Workhouse of Gender in Charles Dickens's Little Dorrit' in Beth Harris, ed, *Famine and* Fashion: *Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* 61.
[258] Peter Brooks uses the words about the opening of La Peau de chagrin. *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 1.

also because the word 'thankfulness' has almost disappeared out of daily speech. Her uplifted hands are indicative of her piety; she thanks God, not Mr. Pancks for her good fortune. This kind of externalization shows Dickens's indebtedness to the contemporary theatre. Such a stance, strongly laden with melodramatic affect, would be visible from the back rows of a large Victorian theatre, from where Dickens, no doubt, was inspired to his grandiloquent style. Such a 'point' of extreme emotional expression was an important part of a Victorian actress's acting skills, and the conviction with which she could convey such wretchedness and sudden bliss was indicative of her talent (cf. my sub-chapter 'Dickens and other show-folk')

Barbara Hardy interestingly claims that in Little Dorrit sentimentality is not, as in earlier novels, used 'to solve problems, reach conclusions and attempt a grandiose finality'.[259] But at one point Dickens stumbles into banality and lets the otherwise feeble Frederick burst out into a fit of holy wrath on Amy's behalf as Fanny accuses Amy of her disgracing the 'family credit'.

> 'Done?' Returned the old man pointing to her sister's place, 'where's your affectionate, invaluable friend? Where's your devoted guardian? Where's your more than mother? How dare you set up superiorities against all these characters combined in your sister? For shame, you false girl, for shame!' (405).

This device, which Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'authorial unmasking', makes it seem as if the author has worked himself into a suffocating state of indignation on account of his heroine.[260] As I see it, his outbursts represent the failing conscience of his brother. Frederick is William's double; he has resigned where William keeps up pretention. But Frederick's aroused state interestingly seems to pick up the indignation of the audience, and *their* indignation is it that Dickens gives an emotional push, as it were. Dickens cannot help being actor *and* audience, thrilled by the interaction between those 'on stage' and the auditorium.

The highly dramatic image is Amy Dorrit comforting and feeding her imprisoned father seems to crystallize the theme of parental exploitation. The 'Father of the Marshalsea' has composed his own truths about why he is living in the debtors' prison. He has cast himself as the protagonist in his own play, and Amy its chief patron and protector. Like a mother she shelters her father's imaginative world from degradation, as 'The Child of the Marshallsea' 'had always upon her, the care of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars

[259] Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens*, (London: The Athlone Press University of London, 1979), 18.
[260] Michail Bakhtin, ed. by Michael Holquist, transl. by Michael Emerson*The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austen: The University of Texas Press 1981), 304

together' (60). To convey the full impact of William Dorrit's uninhibited voracity and Amy's sacrifice, Dickens relates the Roman myth of filial piety:

> There was a classical daughter once – perhaps who ministered to her father in prison as her mother had ministered to her. Little Dorrit, though of the unheroic modern stock, and mere English, did much more, in comforting her father's wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned, through all his years of famine (192).

In his seminal work on relations between fiction, painting and drama, Martin Meisel shows how the classical image of *Caritas Romana,* recorded initially by the Roman historian Valerius Maximum, inspired artistic creations in eighteenth and nineteenth century painters, poets and dramatists.[261] Meisel, who claims that Dickens was greatly indebted to the visual arts, claims that Dickens would be familiar with the motif of filial piety in paintings to which he would have had access.[262] Dickens would also have been acquainted with most of what was running on the London stages. The popular verse-play *Grecian Daughter* (1772) by Arthur Murphy depicts the hero Evander imprisoned in a cavern left to starve to death. An exited jailor, Philotas, relates to the audience how Euphrasia saves her father's life:

> 'The father fostered at his daughter's breast! –
> Oh! Filial piety! – The milk designed
> For her own offspring, on the parent's lip
> Allays the parching fever.' [263]

The dramatic and pictorial representations depict the parent who unnaturally and vampire-like feeds on the child, but the perversion, a 'paradoxical physical inversion' is licensed by the allusions to 'heroism and piety and a ''higher moral'' law'.[264] The Christian idea of redemption through sacrifice is evident here; the daughter saves her father's life and secures her place among the blessed. To avoid too heated implications Dickens disengages Amy erotically, and lets the image of a child shape her 'meagre' figure.[265]

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[261] Martin Meisel, *Realizations : Narratives, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*, (Princeton, New York: Princeton University Press, 1983), 311.
[262] Meisel, *Realizations : Narratives, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*, 308.
[263] Arthur Murphy, *The Grecian Daughter,* ACT II (London: W. Griffin MDCCLXXII), 25.
[264] Meisel, *Realizations : Narratives, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*, 303.
[265] Meisel, *Realizations: Narratives, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*, 304.

The erotic implications, as I see it, are indeed present, but what we learn of Amy later eradicates these implications, as there are limits to Amy's sacrifices. When hearing of her father's friendliness to John Chivery Amy ejects the highly charged outburst: 'O, father, how can you! O, dear, dear father, how can you, can you, do it!' (183). She refuses, however humble, to let circumstances dictate her into a loveless life. Her father puts pressure on her to accept the offer, but Amy refuses to comply and turns John down, directly and emphatically:

> 'As to me' said Little Dorrit 'think as little of me as you can; the less, the better. When you think of me at all John, let it only be as the child you have seen grow up in prison, with one set of duties always occupying her; as a weak, retired, contented, unprotected girl.' (184)

By refusing to leave her body at her father's disposal she further strengthens her integrity and authenticity. She is not a classical daughter after all, but a thoroughly contemporary, Victorian daughter, protecting her virtue at all costs.

By 'classical' Dickens may additionally have implied what James R. Kincaid refers to as performing ones duties 'with an earnestness and single-mindedness we can and perhaps should emulate'.[266] However, the idealized portrait of Amy takes shape against the backdrop of an idealized Christian thought: Tore Rem points out that 'the transgressive aspect of the melodramatic plot also offers a Christian writer like Dickens the chance of testing the moral integrity of his good characters *in extremis*'.[267] The premature redemption of the Dorrit brothers, and in particular William, who saunters straight into a fairground-heaven is but one example. It is tempting to look away from this aspect, its implications seeming so outdated and its banality being so blatant. One example is when Amy gives Mrs. Clennam a regular Sunday Sermon on the charity of Christ: 'Be guided, only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities' (661).'Little Dorrit's difference rests in the direct link between the values of her heart and her moral actions. Her authenticity is paramount'.[268] Absolutely, and here lies the deeply *anti-pessimistic* aspect of the novel: Redemption is self-redemption through the volunteer 'incarceration' of carrying the burden of others. Michael Slater points out that '*Little Dorrit* ends with one of Dickens's most impressive uses of biblical cadence' stressing Amy's role as Christ-figure. The idealized Amy demonstrates

[266] James R. Kincaid 'Performance, Roles and the Nature of Self in Dickens' in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. By Carol Hanbury McKay (Eastleigh and London: The Macmillan Press Limited 1989), 11.
[267] Rem, Dickens, *Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination, 28.*
[268] Rem, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination*, 187.

Dickens's notion that 'the main function of art is not necessarily to reflect reality but to improve that reality'.[269]

The melodramatic hero and heroine, on whom Dickens moulded his protagonists, live their virtuous lives between excessive restraint and sudden 'outpourings of the soul'. The act of holding back, or enduring the emotional pressure, appears to justify the excess of emotion and brings about the moral quality of 'true', 'just', or authentic feeling. Restraint and reflection, cleverly coupled with the narrator's voice, moulds the intelligence of the hero, whereas the emotional outbreaks seem to confirm their humanness. 'Feigning' or misrepresenting seems to be contrary to their kind of 'hero-quality' and related to corruption.

[269] Juliet John, Dickens's *Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 19.

Conclusions

My thesis has examined the influence from the Victorian theatre on plot and characterization in *Little Dorrit.* Endeavouring to map the effects of such theatrical devices on the narrative I have analysed ten characters from the novel. The choices were made in an effort to see the variety and range of the novel's characters and how they would best illuminate my focus of melodrama and authenticity.

Dickens's conscious use of traditional theatrical devices in shaping his characters greatly colours our conception of them as the colourful and vivacious figures. By employing the structural framework of Victorian melodrama, found in contemporary theatre and novels alike, Dickens also imports its characteristic moral codes. By thus paving the way for the redemption of his noble heroes and the fall of his malicious villains, he necessarily paved the way for accusations of sentimentality and of predictability in his plots.

Rather than seeking to camouflage his muse, Dickens lays bare his sources of inspiration through the use of stage metaphors. This is also the case in *Little Dorrit*. Speaking of the hero Arthur Clennam's losses, the narrator conjures up images from the theatre: '- now when the stage was dusty, the scenery was faded, when the youthful actors were dead, when the orchestra was empty, when the lights were out' (518). Clennam, furthermore, himself speaks of his youthful flirtations with Flora Finching as 'performances' (518) and frequently employs terms from the theatre as metaphors. Dickens seeks to effect an emotional engagement in his reader by exposing her to a row of contrasting characters, partly resembling those of already established popular forms of entertainment, as diverse as the Punch figure Flintwinch and the dancer Fanny Dorrit. A stark polarity prevails between the altogether good characters and the altogether bad, such as Amy Dorrit and Rigaud. The largeness of Flora highlights the littleness of Amy; the prosperity of Merdle contrasts with his spiritual poverty. Characters move from rags to riches, from safe snugness to despair, and from superiority to total degradation. In *Little Dorrit* there is ample evidence of Dickens's inclination 'to shift through the affective gears from pathos to laughter and back again'.[270]

The apparent mixture of archetypical stage figures from melodrama, like Rigaud, and characters with a more complex 'interior', like Arthur Clennam, contributes even further to the theatricality of Dickens's style. The characters seem to move on and off stage all the time;

[270] Ledger, Sally Ledger, '''Don't be so melodramatic!'': Dickens and the affective mode', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007), www.19.bbk.ac.uk,
6. Acquired April 6 2013.

one minute we are in the theatre, the next we are not. Not only does the novelist employ rapid changes from tragic to burlesque, he frequently constructs fusions of the two in one and the same character. Many of Dickens's characters balance between the tragic and the comic. One such fusion is the parodic portrait of Flora Finching, whose tragedy the hero contemplates with feelings wherein 'his sense of the sorrowful and his sense of the comical curiously blended' (129). It is, James Kincaid states, the 'major function of Dickens's humorous rhetoric to effect this curious blending'. In *Little Dorrit*, he continues, 'the black humour supports the structural and tonal irony'.[271]

Dickens's inspiration from the playhouse is evident on almost all levels of his composition. The loans include the body language of the actor, but we also find the director at work, as Dickens seems to be orchestrating his scenes in every detail. First he is the set designer, establishes the room, and builds the scenery. He takes care to choose easily identifiable objects, often of symbolic value, like the parrot in Mrs. Merdle's room and the gold watch in Mrs. Clennam's (27). He meticulously describes dress, colour, and no detail escapes his attention. Once established, he lets his characters on to the set. The entrance of Mrs. Merdle is highly theatrical; she even enters through 'a curtained doorway' (200). Dickens's positioning of characters in the room reflects the director's positioning of the actors on stage, so-called blocking, designated to achieve the maximum visual effect. He frequently makes use of the tableau, a much-treasured device of his day (cf. my sub-chapter on Amy Dorrit). Victorian theatres, increasingly resembling the box, put great efforts into the creation of effective tableaux. The family's departure from the Marshalsea evokes the grand finale of a play: Dickens draws attention to his theatrical device, alluding to the tableau as 'the grand pictorial composition formed by the family' (*LD* 386). This kind of device is one applied frequently in *Little Dorrit,* and 'reminds us of the tendencies of the nineteenth century stage towards static pictorialism'.[272]

Dickens's entertainers were given definite ludic characteristics in other novels, such as the Crummleses in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Wopsle in *Great Expectations.* They are marked by exhibitionism, hamming, and a true passion for acting; they are, in other words, *amateurs* in its true sense. In *Little Dorrit*, however, these playful elements are as good as gone, leaving the novel's one theatrical lady, Fanny Dorrit, sadly in the social lurch. No *joie de vivre* is afforded the dance theatre, and the acting of Fanny is indicative only of her pretentiousness and conceit. This phenomenon does not really go well with Dickens's professed love for

[271] Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, 196-197.
[272] John, *Dickens's Villains*, 105.

popular entertainment. It rather points in the direction of a readiness to confirm to the tastes of his middle-class readers.

In creating his devilish villain Dickens borrows excessively from melodrama. Rigaud, the traditional villain of the novel, supplies us with a 'model' of melodramatic villainy. Apart from providing the reader with the epitome of heartless villainy, Rigaud stands for utter misrepresentation and artificiality. But curiously, through his destruction he is not able to perform what he is intended to: cause the fall of evil. The evils of *Little Dorrit* are not purged through his fall; a melodramatic ending cannot bring about the happy ending.

By using the traditional framework melodrama, found in theatre and novels alike, Dickens provided his audience with an easily recognizable narrative structure. His ever-increasing middle-class audience swallowed his attacks on social institutions together with the largely safe moral norms of melodrama, however transgressive. In *Little Dorrit* Dickens continues his exploration of the strong kinship between the theatre and other institutions of his society. The church, the government, and the business world are satirized as obsolete institutions inhabited by role-playing characters. The benevolence of Mr. Casby, the piety of Mrs. Clennam, the government dealings of the Barnacles and the Stiltstalkings; it is all acting. The Circumlocution Office, represented by such hilarious inventions as Titus Barnacle, is striking in its likeness to farcical comedy and highly suited for Dickens's satire. The burlesque characters, like Flora Finching and John Chivery, provide Dickens with a backdrop for his presentation of the genuine representation of human experience. Comic and grotesque characters, like Flintwinch and Mrs. General, are marked by excessive, abnormal and grotesque behaviour. The characters come across as fragmentary, a characteristic that heightens the theatricality further. They all perform and display their strangeness, much like a street entertainer who displays his five-legged dog and his dancing rabbit. Highlighting and exaggerating, Dickens puts a follow spot onto his characters, so to speak.

The hyperbolic expression referred to as 'melodramatic' performs a different task in different characters of *Little Dorrit.* As the melodramatic theatricality of the heroes springs from the dynamics between controlled restraint and uncontrolled emotion, and not from the urge to cause a certain effect, they claim a kind of authenticity that Dickens's other characters are not allowed. In parody and authentic representation alike Dickens uses affected language, but he places the parody far from 'the real thing' in order to make sure the reader does not mistake the one for the other. One moment he uses sentimental language in parody, the next moment to convey authenticity. When Mrs. Merdle says 'I am a child of nature' and 'My feelings are touched in a moment' she is in fact impersonating Amy and pointing to the ideal

she is clearly not. By employing a myriad of inherited theatrical conventions, rapidly shifting in style and level of authenticity, Dickens creates the kind of artistic climate wherein his characters, and his own theatrical genius, can thrive.

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